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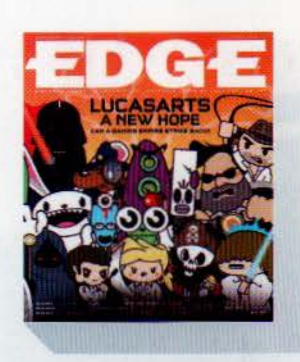
CAN A GAMING EMPIRE STRIKE BACK?

FEATURES WILL WRIGHT'S SPORE EXPLORED **BATTLEFIELD FACES THE FUTURE** SHOULD DOCTORS PRESCRIBE VIDEOGAMES?

PREVIEWED CALL OF DUTY 3 **SUPERMAN RETURNS** NEED FOR SPEED CARBON **DEAD RISING** ELEBITS **TINGLE RPG** RYZOM RING

REVIEWED PREY **DISGAEA 2** TEKKEN: DARK RESURRECTION **ULTIMATE GHOSTS 'N' GOBLINS** APE ESCAPE: MILLION MONKEYS **THE SHIP**





Videogames are famous for being a dynamic business, but although publishers would like to see their profits soar ever skywards, and programmers would love to see the power at their disposal march forwards forever in time to the beat of Moore's Law, the reality is rather more fickle. And so, this month, we bring you four snapshots of change.

The first is evolution, in the shape of Will Wright's *Spore*. A true god sim, this promises to mimic the evolution of videogames as well as sketching out the origin of a species. It's almost certainly the most ambitious project ever seen in gaming – indeed, Wright's team probably have algorithms up their sleeves to prove it – and you can read about its progress on p50.

Then, revolution. If you've picked up this magazine, there's a good chance at least one of the figures on the cover gave you a thrill of nostalgia. LucasArts touched a whole generation of gamers, whether your tastes were for dog-fights or dog-detectives, and on p58 we pay a visit to see how, after a few years in the wilderness, a reinvention may be about to recapture that original spirit.

But even in a business as dynamic as games, some things seem to stay in stasis. The question of women in gaming is one we've tackled before, but it's become impossible to ignore how little is changing. So rather than tackle the old issues of how to get more women playing – and more women making – games, we look on p66 at just why it's so hard for games to have leading ladies. Does having a female heroine always mean having a weak hero?

And then that final change of all: death. Sound sombre? Not when the death in question is the glorious finale of *R-Type Final*, one of the rare series ever allowed to take its own life and plan its own funeral. Read why its suicide was shameless on p90. Which takes us from genesis to armageddon in just one month: perhaps that dynamic reputation is justified after all.



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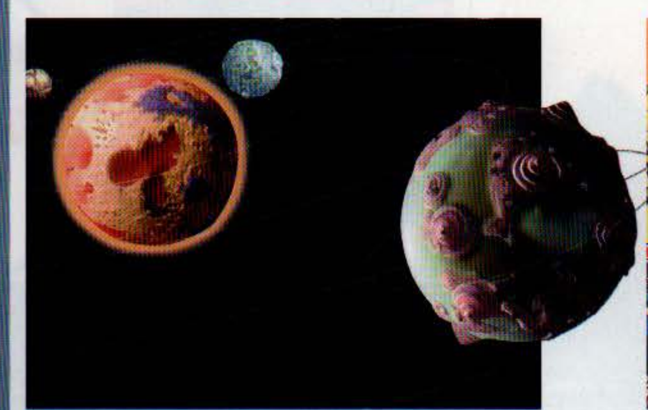


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This month











Every month

EDGE

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"Donut be scary! And donut going nowhere!"







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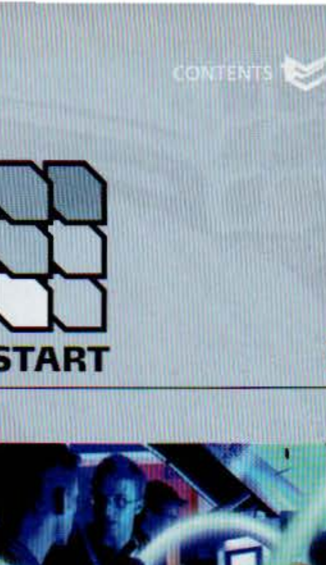


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Hype



Review






START

EVENT

Rein and shine at Develop Brighton

Despite an off-message opening, the first developer conference in the UK for '06 isn't short on confidence

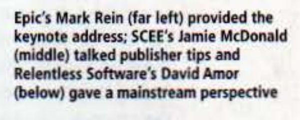
Conventional wisdom suggests that conference keynotes are supposed to set the agenda for the content that will follow. Epic's Mark Rein, on the other hand, sees them as a chance to simply get a few things off his chest, and he used his opening address to attendees of the inaugural Develop Conference on July 12–13 in Brighton to tell developers that episodic gaming is a dead end, and that Intel should stop harming the PC gaming sector by shipping computers with integrated graphics solutions incapable of running the best new releases. By the end of the day his comments had made BBC Online's front page, but they had little relevance to an event whose scores of conference sessions focused on neither topic. It was a weird beginning for an event looking to rapidly establish itself as a must-not-miss date on the calendar of European game developers. Many left the keynote wondering what, exactly, the next 48 hours would have in store.



The two-day Conference and Expo programme was bookended by the ATi Developer Day and the GAMES:EDU initiative. It all added up to a formidable package, considering this was its first time out

By the end of the day Mark Rein's comments had made BBC Online's front page, but they had little relevance to an event whose sessions offered no focus on episodic gaming or Intel

The answer was a lot – there were 60 conference sessions packed into two days – but also little. Certainly attendees were spoiled for choice, with talks ranging in nature from Max/Maya interoperability to women in games and a heaving mass of topics in between, but, as is so frequently the case with gatherings such as this, many were pitched at a middle-ground level in order that less knowledgable attendees in the audience might benefit, leaving more senior types



Epic's Mark Rein (far left) provided the keynote address; SCEE's Jamie McDonald (middle) talked publisher tips and Relentless Software's David Amor (below) gave a mainstream perspective











feeling that their time might have been more productively spent elsewhere. Indeed, with seven sessions running simultaneously at any one time, it was already difficult enough to choose the right place to be. While the team behind the revamped Game Developers Conference London in October (see page 13) are aiming to be 'narrowly focusing on key next-generation console and PC development issues', it's clear Develop's organisers intended to present a broader church in order to widen its appeal. Will the programme be streamlined next year? The meagre numbers in some of the more poorly-attended hour-long sessions suggested that it will have to be.

The organisers certainly got the venue right: Brighton's Metropole hotel was equal to the task of hosting what was an ambitious setup, and this city by the sea provided ample opportunities to network long into the evening (we even heard of one opportunistic group of tired and emotional developers attempting to pitch a game idea – centred on the concept of pornographic karaoke, no less – to a surprisingly patient Phil Harrison of SCE in the early hours of one particular morning).

In the final conference session, entitled Develop Debrief, it was left to a panel incorporating the likes of Rein, Harrison and Revolution's Charles Cecil to sum up the mood in game development right now. Harrison asserted that the industry is in good shape,

We heard of one group of tired developers attempting to pitch a game idea – centred on the concept of pornographic karaoke, no less – to a surprisingly patient Phil Harrison

that confidence should be high, that there's hard work to be done but that opportunities exist for success. Cecil claimed to be sensing a new trend for creativity coming to the fore, now that technology is no longer restraining designers. Rein agreed, adding that more people work in game development today than have ever worked in the sector, and that job opportunities have never been so plentiful. It was an upbeat end for an uneven conference. This time next year, with the challenge of the introduction of two more next-generation consoles having been undertaken, it will be interesting to see if their moods – and indeed the shape of the Develop event itself – have changed. Indeed, this time next year, the whole make-up of the UK's gaming calendar will, yet again, have evolved. Read on for a guide to the rest of the year's events.

Continued »

Creativity-led production
Tetsuya Mizuguchi

How has Mizuguchi done it? How has he been able to convince his paymasters to give him the freedom to make games as diverse as *Sega Rally*, *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*? That was the question attendees were expecting to be answered, hoping to take away his wisdom and use it to wrestle their own careers into new, exciting shapes, rather than continue making further iterations of proven formulae until the year dot. Alas, Mizuguchi's opening remark – "I don't know exactly how I've been doing this" – set the tone for a presentation that was as light on conclusions as it was packed with charm.

The key to his success, asserted Mizuguchi, is that, right from the beginning (he left college to join Sega in 1990), he wanted to make videogames that inspired a sense of awe in the player, to create feelings on a par with those brought about by the best films, music and books. "All you needed was an idea – any idea," he explained. Well, that and a parent company such as Sega, which was a much less conservative beast in the '90s than it has become today.

And so Mizuguchi outlined his personal journey, from *Sega Rally* through to *Manx TT* and ultimately on to *Lumines* and *Ninety-Nine Nights*, noting how music has influenced his career along the way, from witnessing MTV's arrival in Japan and his first ever rave, in Switzerland, in 1994.

If you think of games in terms of genres, you will always stick within those genres, he concluded, so "I think instead about human desires. Basic human desires, and then take it deeper and deeper." Signing off, he encouraged the audience to never give up, even if it takes "three, four or even five years to find the idea." It was just the kind of rallying call the younger attendees came along to hear. Some of the veterans, meanwhile, lamented that finding the idea is rarely the most significant problem.

Design by democracy
Peter Molyneux

The title of this session, it turned out, was meant to be ironic. "There is no democracy" in game design, Molyneux proposed right at the beginning, suggesting that it needs to have a singular "holistic vision," and that dev staff need to be "tricked" into thinking that parts of the finished design are their contributions.

Then the audience was given a history lesson on Molyneux's work, beginning with *Populous* and coming right up to date with his latest project, which – of course – cannot be discussed right now. The most interesting aspect of this talk wasn't how the games themselves have evolved, but how the processes behind them have, with Molyneux explaining that he would have had all of the code of a game like *Theme Park* in his head at one point, but that nowadays he doesn't even understand how the 3D rendering technology in *Fable* really works.

Molyneux remains consumed with worries, talking about how publisher feedback is "scary," and how unnerving it is when you're making decisions that directly drive the course of a project whose funding can run to $30m. "Just one design decision can cost $2–3m," he shuddered.

What would even the most committed Molyneux-watcher have learned from this session? That he will never again sneakily promise a game feature to the press if it's something he's already tried, and failed, to get his dev team to support. That a design doc is a good idea, even if "nobody actually reads the whole thing, just bits of it" (*Fable 2*'s currently runs to nearly 1,000 pages). That it's really important to check and re-check everything (the story about *Fable*'s sneak mechanic and its effect on some players is a lesson to all designers).

The session ended with a brief Q&A. It would have been a better slot with more time dedicated to engaging with an eager, and attentive, floor.



The weather and the location certainly helped Develop shine, although turnout in some sessions was disappointing. Developers from outside of the UK were also notable for their general absence



Designing new kinds of games for the masses
David Amor, Paulina Bozek, Rob Kay

The line-up for this roundtable was a very effective reminder of how games have changed over the last few years. Representing, resepectively, a buzzer (fom Relentless' *Buzz!*). a microphone (from Sony London's *SingStar*) and a three-quarters size Gibson SG (Harmonix's *Guitar Hero*), the first job for the panel was the address the odd coincidence of why the three poster-boys for mainstream gaming appeal were all music games -- indeed, were all, music games that relied on a real-world peripherals. The answers weren't as radical as some audience members may have hoped – especially if you'd previously had the chance to attend one of Bozek's (above) tireless seminars to explain the passionate clarity behind her design ideas – but they did throw up some interesting details. Amor talked about how moving from music to trivia in Buzz! had been a harder challenge than expected, since it meant having to squeeze more information on screen (music clips have the great advantage of being invisible), and how hard it is to keep a roomful of players engaged without an armoury of pop choruses. But it was Kay's secret of mainstream design which produces the real concensus: make it easy, and then make it easier still.





The Expo element of Develop '06 was far from heaving with attendees, giving new technologies such as Philips' amBX a bigger opportunity to make an impact

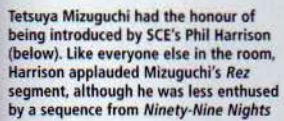


Games design room 101
Simon Byron, Peter Molyneux, Jonathan Smith

Weirdly, the most entertaining and passionate session of Develop's entire duration centred on negativity: here, three panellists were each invited to consign to the dustbin something game-related. Smith, producer of the *Lego Star Wars* series at TT Games, opened the session by proposing death to 'balance', using *Need For Speed: Underground* as an example of where developers are going wrong, by making games in which progression is routine, where surprises are absent, where a lack of genuine challenge means that players are not given the opportunity to feel like they've accomplished anything significant. Compare it to *Trauma Center*, he proposed, whose difficulty spikes bring about "a real buzz". It was a tough sell to an audience accustomed to making games for ever-wider audiences, but eventually 'balance' was the first proposal into the bin.

Byron (above) opted for an even trickier target: stealth. Quite apart from sneaking around being a little bit grubby, he ventured, it's not what games should be about; "games should be about empowerment, not hiding," he noted. Of more concern, he suggested, is that stealth is being shoehorned into every type of game, and asked if attendees recalled the dramatic leap from the plane in *No One Lives Forever*. The exciting cable-car shootout? Or was the thing that stuck in their heads "the section where you hide in an office for a bit"? It was a convincing argument all round, but the audience, many of whom were no doubt returning to projects post-Develop into which stealth sections were being shoehorned, would not allow it into the bin.

Molyneux picked an easier target: cutscenes. The audience agreed on every point: they're poor because they're not interactive; they're produced with bad actors; they interrupt the flow of the story, and so on. The viewpoints were blinkered, ignoring the value of, say, the *GTA* series' story sequences, but into the bin cutscenes went.



Tetsuya Mizuguchi had the honour of being introduced by SCE's Phil Harrison (below). Like everyone else in the room, Harrison applauded Mizuguchi's *Rez* segment, although he was less enthused by a sequence from *Ninety-Nine Nights*

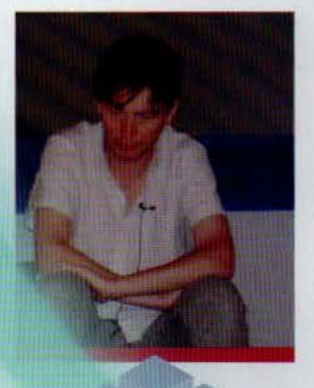






The opinion jam
Various contributors

With 11 speakers given three minutes each to evangelise a gaming topic to the audience, this was the most lighthearted session at Develop. Highlights included **Miles Jacobson** of Sports Interactive presenting a watertight argument with 'Gameplay > polygons' (challenged, he countered simply: "How else are we able to sell a million copies a year of a game like *Football Manager*?"); Charles Cecil (above) explaining why developers should stop copying Hollywood, since it does not have the answers to their problems; Rob Kay from Harmonix appealing for more accessible games (and death to orcs); PR expert Simon Byron proposing death to freebies in the industry, so that games do not become devalued among those who should be championing them; and Kuju's Ben Gonshaw campaigning for games as simply entertainment, not challenges. At the end, no one seemed sure who'd actually 'won'.





Lights, camera... Where movies and videogames meet
Rob Fahey, Andrew McDonald

A more accurate title for this session would've been 'Where movies and videogames fail to meet', since McDonald (above), the producer behind such films as Trainspotting, The Beach and 28 Days Later, has no experience of working with the videogame industry – to his evident chagrin. Apparently he identified 28 Days Later's appeal as a potential game property some time ago and began shopping it around to various UK publishers, none of whom were interested. Crucially, however, this was after the film had been released. Such time-frame inconsistencies didn't hurt *GoldenEye*'s chances, of course, but times have clearly changed.

One of McDonald's most interesting views mapped out a future in which game developers and movie studios share CG resources during production. The two disparate industries have a lot of bridge-building to do before then, though.

What the Develop conference proved is how successful a non-London event can be in fostering a sense of occasion and more importantly of concentration, as everyone relishes being away from the office. With a full calendar from now to Christmas, we look ahead at the UK's gaming events to assess how the balance is shifting from the capital to the regions.









Mobile gaming is still a hit and miss affair – not least due to poor distribution methods – but games like (left to right) *Lumines*, *Dirty Sanchez* and *Tower Bloxx* are worth the ffort

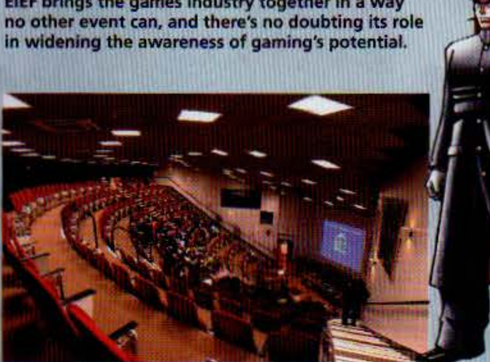
Edinburgh

Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival, August 21 to 22, www.eief.co.uk

Still struggling to cement its identity, this year's Edinburgh games festival is a leaner, more focused event. Over just two days, the first based at the opulent Royal College of Physicians (right), the festival is aiming to take advantage of having the great and the good of the industry in one place, at one time by directing their attention to the wider creative, cultural and social horizons of gaming.

While this does mean an emphasis on the artistic aspirations of videogames – the world premier of the new chapter in the Inanimate Alice series will showcase how the lines between game, film, literature and graphic design are becoming increasingly blurred – the programme also has a firm grip on the commercial realities facing the gaming business. One session will tackle the real possibility that public money may soon become available to fund game production, just as it has in the past for TV and film projects. What would games designed without the pressure of market expectations look like, especially if it had to answer to the kind of public service requirements that the BBC has? Other topics include the growing popularity of game music, the thorny issue of censorship and the mechanics of emotion. While it's yet to establish itself as a crucial dairy date, the EIEF brings the games industry together in a way no other event can, and there's no doubting its role in widening the awareness of gaming's potential.







EIEF Edge Awards

The fourth annual Edinburgh Edge Award is joined by a new sibling

As ever at Edinburgh, we're taking the chance to direct the world's attention to some of the more innovative and exceptional games of the past year, which have often been overlooked by the bulk of the industry. This year's shortlist is *Amped 3*, *Brain Training*, *Electroplankton*, *Ouendan*, *Dragon Quest VIII*, *Fahrenheit*, *Killer 7* and *Guitar Hero* – visit www.eief.co.uk to read the thinking behind these choices. The shortlist will be judged by a panel made up of Jason Rubin, creator of *Jak And Daxter*, Jonathan Smith, producer of *Lego Star Wars*, David Amor, director of Relentless Software, and James Newman, author of Videogames and lecturer in cultural studies at Bath Spa University.

This year, for the first time, there will also be a sister prize for the best new mobile game. After years of promise, the quality and variety of mobile gaming is finally starting to match the hype which has long surrounded the business model, with games such as Gameloft's absorbing *Lumines* (far left), Infospace's inventive *Dirty Sanchez* (middle left) and Digital Chocolate's pitch-perfect *Tower Bloxx* (left) leading the charge. The EIEF Edge Mobile Award is to be voted for by readers of Edge, so check www.edge-online.com for the final shortlist, invest in those that take your fancy and add your vote. The closing date is August 10 so you haven't got long – but then again, isn't quick-fix gaming what the mobile revolution was supposed to be about all along?



Nottingham

GameCity, October 25 to 29
www.gamecity.org

The appeal, and indeed the purpose, of some gaming events can be hard to understand, but GameCity wears its heart on its sleeve. It takes a city – in this case Nottingham – and, for a week, tries to fill it full of games. With the rather surprisingly enthusiastic support of the local council and sponsored by Nottingham Trent University, GameCity will populate shopping malls with demo pods, pubs with download points, cinemas with game screenings and streets with impromptu concerts. Designed to coincide with half-term, the idea is to attract people who wouldn't necessarily think they were interested in games in the first place, as well as catering to those with a more dedicated passion. The event is directed by **Iain Simons**, a longtime writer about videogame culture who also curated last year's NTI* game weekend at the National Film Theatre. For him, the need for an event like GameCity is clear: "We're trying hard to make this an event about the simple joy of playing but without shying away from the fact that games are complicated things. Games aren't stupid, gamers aren't stupid. Our starting position is that videogames are brilliant and interesting and we're working outwards from there. This isn't about reassuring parents about why videogames aren't bad for their kids, it's about exploring and discovering how they are good." And that's not a sentiment we'd ever argue against.



GAMECITY



Some screenings will take place in the Broadway cinema (left) and the Into The Pixel exhibition will also be present

London

London Games Festival, October 2 to 7
www.londongamesfestival.com

GameDevelopers Conference London

LONDON GAMES SUMMIT

The reputations of London's gaming events have taken a knock over the last few years, but the London Games Festival – an umbrella brand for the Game Developers Conference London, ELSPA and TIGA's London Games Summit and the BAFTA Video Games Awards, alongside a number of other satellite events, hopes to change that. GDCL (October 2-4) is a successor to Game Developer Conference Europe, but its new format will see it narrowly focusing on key next-generation development issues, with a single two-day cross-disciplinary session taking a holistic approach to the challenges facing developers. ELSPA's Game Summit, usually guaranteed to attract the heavyweights of the UK games industry, will follow a similar theme, but its emphasis is on the issues of leadership and how best to exploit the new market opportunities the technology brings. The BAFTA Awards, now in their ninth year of recognising videogames, will be looking to see just what has the calibre to replace *Half-Life 2*, which swept the board last year. Cinemas from the Vue chain will be hosting as-yet unannounced game screenings, and the ICA will make an appropriate home for a videogame spin on the BBC's Dragon's Den format. It's an invigorating mix of events, but so far London has little pedigree in being successful at bringing such scattered events together. Perhaps 2006 will be the year that changes it, but hopes aren't high.



EVENT

Videogames: friend or foe?

While some camps may have already made up their minds, prominent European researchers gathered in Brussels to tackle just that question



One issue raised at the event points to an even greater need for a mutual and well-defined approach. Regarding US and European research into videogame violence, the former tends to establish a clear link between violent games and physical aggression, a link refuted by European experts who question the validity of the test conditions

Videogames have never been so popular, but they've never been so hated either. At least, that's a perception that could easily be picked up by following the output of certain media outlets in recent years. The current perception of videogames underpinned the opening session of the Interactive Software Federation of Europe's PC And Videogames: Friend Or Foe? conference. Subsequent comments included submissions from Jean-Pierre Quignaux, representative of both PEGI and UNAF (a French family association) that gaming will fuel a critical debate for the next ten years, that its 'entertraining' potential has yet to be explored and that, in the context of the global village, parents no longer retain the authority required to teach their children about the world.

Videogames can take players beyond just thinking, enabling them to act by inviting them to test their limits, and to play with transgression

Held in Brussels in July, the event then opened its floors to all participants – including representatives from numerous European parental associations, media councils, universities and research institutions – in order to identify the key topics worthy of discussion. The resulting selection was an unsurprising but well-rounded and extensive list: Violence, addiction, time wasting, therapy, education and socialisation.



As an example excerpt, the therapy session covered emerging benefits for players at extreme ends of the age-range. Quignaux referenced a joint endeavour between hospitals in Paris and Hafia that are evaluating the benefit of games on the cognitive skills of senior citizens, with some findings pointing to strong improvements in Alzheimer's patients. And Eva Petersson of Denmark's Aalborg University shared her experience of using virtual spaces for therapy, with Sony's EyeToy proving effective in treating handicapped children, also mentioning that other commercial games can be effective for such applications, but interface is key. More generally, Michael Stora, from France's Observatory of the Digital World and Human Science, elaborated on how videogames can take players beyond just thinking, enabling them to act by inviting them to test their limits, and to play with transgression – all processes inherent to growing up, he notes – an act facilitated by widely-recognised titles like *Ico*, *Fable*, *Halo* and *The Sims*.

This is just a fraction of the trajectory of topics covered in the event. Indeed, the conference itself feels like groundwork for an enormous and vital debate that's yet to come, an event that mobilised gaming's thinkers and researchers in order to focus

Newswire



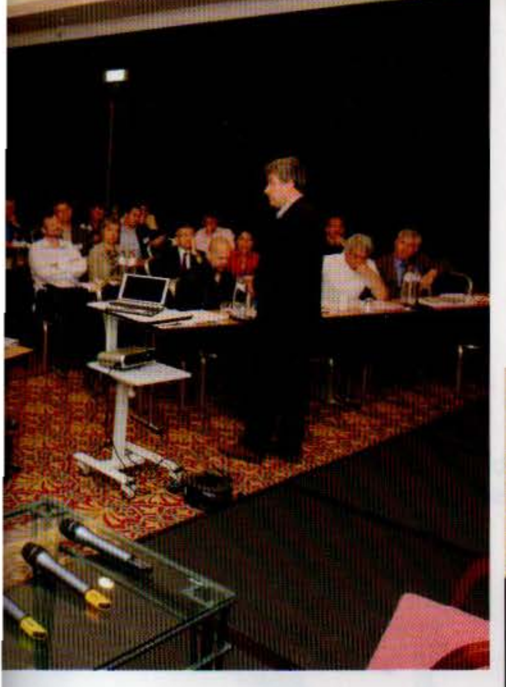
Hardware revision

Sony has withdrawn a Dutch PSP advert after it became branded as 'racist'. Designed to promote the release of the Ceramic White edition PSP in Europe, the ad depicts a white woman aggressively grasping the chin of a black woman, along with the tagline 'White is coming'. With the ad – which accompanied by another version where the roles were reversed – coming under increasing fire as the image circulated around the world, Sony retracted it, saying: "We recognise that people have a wide variety of perceptions about such imagery and we wish to apologise to those who perceived the advert differently to that intended."

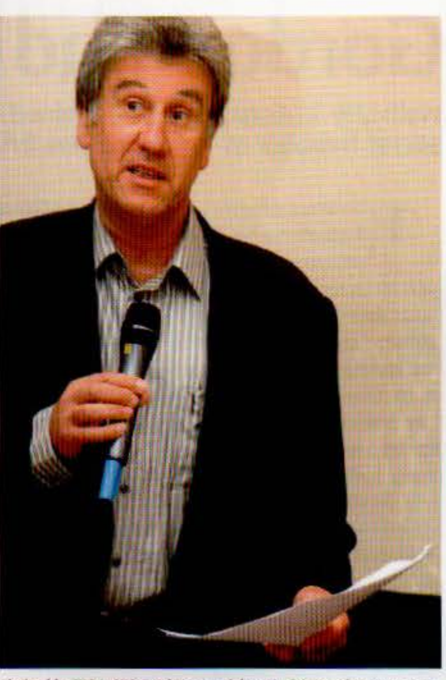


There was little time for the attendees to discuss the final agreed topic, socialisation, but it was recognised that it's already one of the best documented of the topics raised, especially thanks to the wide reporting of MMORPGs





on a framework for discussion that, hopefully, only grows from here, free from the need to moralise an editorial or flex a political agenda. And it's not a moment too soon, not when gaming's most visible frontline battles are debates that need more evidence to fuel them, lest they get burned out by the flaming invective and weary dismissal of message board commentators responding to equally reactionary scare-stories and accusations from gaming's critics. Regardless, it's an engrossing and vital range of subject matter, one that's pertinent to society's own interaction with videogames in recent years, a relationship that's only just beginning to take shape, but is very likely to be long-term.



Chaired by TIGA CEO Fred Hasson (above), the meeting was more a dialogue than a series of presentations. It opened with ISFE secretary-general Patrice Chazerand emphasising the importance of involving game publishers in such an exchange of ideas, too





Mission's statement

Taking the battle against cancer to a virtual body

Developed for young cancer patients, HopeLab's *Re-Mission* (above and left) is a thirdperson shooter aimed at providing therapy and education for such sufferers. Assuming the role of nanobot Roxxi, players are injected into a human body that's under attack from cancer, along with its accompanying effects.

According to its own press release – and, perhaps, bolstered by the ideas and results presented at the conference – *Re-Mission* has been proven to work, "giving teens and young adults a sense of power and control over their cancer." Its actual controls are overwhelming, however, offering full 3D movement and requiring the kind of dexterity that could hamper its accessibility. But it's much harder to fault its depiction – the body-as-battleground makes for a powerful driving force, egging the player on to mop up as much of the badness as possible, a device that also proves potent in the more abstract circumstances of Capcom's *Okami*.

MARK GRIFFITHS, professor of gambling studies at Nottingham Trent University

ISFE attendee Professor Griffiths shares some of his thoughts about the perceptions of addiction and the use of videogames as healing tools.

The ISFE event was opened with a comment about the importance of engaging game publishers in the kind of dialogue that was tackled by the conference – do you agree? And was it an important event?
I think such an event is important for any stakeholder. The good thing about the seminar is that it really did bring regulators, publishers, educators, psychologists – everyone who has any kind of stake – together. It's one of the better seminars I've been to, and nobody pulled any punches. I certainly came away feeling positive; I've been at events before where people wouldn't listen to reasoned argument on both positive and negative topics. I think that having a balanced, rather than evangelical, perspective on both the positive and the negative is a good thing, and I wasn't the only one in attendance to think that.

A 'game-addict' clinic has recently opened in Amsterdam to help people kick what's supposedly become an addiction for them. What are your thoughts on that?
People talk about positive

> "People talk about positive addictions – if you're using the word 'addiction', you've got to realise that with all addictions there are fringe negatives, but there can be lots of benefits for the individual"

addictions – if you're using the word 'addiction', you've got to realise that with all addictions there are always fringe negatives, but on the whole there can be lots of benefits for the individual. My golden rule is that the difference between a healthy enthusiasm and an addiction is that the former adds to life and the latter takes away from it. If you apply that kind of layperson's philosophy to videogame playing, it's clear that for the vast majority of people who are playing excessively, that there's little or no detrimental effect on their lives, and it's something that's life-affirming, raises their self-esteem and makes them feel better about themselves. I hate this idea from doomsayers that people who do things to excess are addicted, because they're not. Few people are genuinely addicted to games. That's just the nature of videogames – they're moreish and incredible fun, which is why people play them to excess.

Is there a danger of promoting games as a clinical drug, as it were, in that the positive therapeutic aspects may only get recognised as something to be prescribed and administered by a doctor?
I don't hold that view. There are lots of useful analogies in life, but videogame playing is idiosyncratic behaviour that you simply have to take on its own merits.

Who do you think is most holding back the recognition of the positive effects of gaming? Academia, the government, education?
It could well be academia, but then there are so few of us. Even



though I publish as many articles on the negatives as well as the positives, I reckon I get 90 per cent of my coverage through the negatives. I've been very balanced about the subject and, when I talk about those aspects, I try to put them into context, but then the media jumps in. Games over the years have been given a bad press, and I feel responsible for some of it, but I'm always very balanced when I put out a press release. I just can't control journalists and the way that they report. But I do think there's been a sea shift in recent years, as there are more positive gaming stories around. Then again, the Dutch videogame clinic has already gotten far more coverage than any positive story out there.

OUT THERE

A GAME OF CRICKET

Despite continual advances in AI or pathfinding routines, no pre-programmed CPU foe can claim to be truly unpredictable. In an effort to bring true natural randomness into the world of games, Leiden University student Wim van Eck sought to combat this problem by adding an element of true nature. For his Animal Controlled Computer Games graduate thesis, Eck built a physical representation of a standard *Pac-Man* level and, instead of computer controlled ghosts, used visual tracking systems to utilise live crickets as stand-in enemies.

By manipulating motors underneath each of six maze sections, Eck used the crickets' own instinctual programming to move away from ground vibrations to pursue a player-controlled virtual Pac-Man or flee from a powered-up one. In the end, though, Eck found the crickets actually outsmarted the system by learning that a virtual Pac-Man is no threat and, in a bizarre coincidence, one moulted its skin to create in essence an immobile fifth ghost, lending even further unpredictability – that's an element of game design even Miyamoto and Iwata together couldn't create.

EVENT

Gordon and friends

Half-Life 2: Episode 2 to be joined by secret freebies as Valve crashes EA's party

The Valve difference is highlighted by **Gabe Newell**. He has surprised journalists and analysts by arriving at an EA press event to discuss his company's next wave of games. His hosts have no surprises, in fact they've gone out of their way to deflate expectations. EA talk of maximising revenue opportunities, and ensuring a stable flow of product. Newell has a different spin: "By evolving our development process to an episodic approach, we're able to reduce risk from things such as schedule and funding and invest more in new types of gameplay."

And so first comes the expected *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*. When every possible plot development, down to the merest details of characters involved, can be considered spoilers, the details are cloudy. But: Alyx is hurt – she's glimpsed falling from a ruined rail bridge, then being carried to safety by a Vortigaunt. To replace her, the role of that now-friendly alien species has been upgraded. They're here to fight – sporting a psychic attack that seems to bounce their opponents back. There's the hint that Gordon will be fighting within a squad of Vortigaunts – the open, much larger levels and previous comments to the US magazines fuelling speculation. New technology, what Valve dubs 'cinematic physics,' should add spectacle to *Episode 2*'s interactive cutscenes. Newell showcased the collapse of the railway bridge – crumbling, twisting and finally crashing into the chasm below. *Episode Two: Everything Is Fine.* Unless you're an in-game NPC.

Place an entrance portal on a wall, and an exit on the ceiling. Walk into the entrance and you're released through the exit. Easy. Except it's dizzying, complex and hugely entertaining

What comes next? It's a witty, whimsical trailer for a mini-campaign to be packaged alongside *Episode 2*. Set in the Half-Life 2 universe, *Portal* takes the player to The Aperture Science Enrichment Centre. It's a test course for a new type of weapon: one which can rip holes in reality. Place an entrance portal on a wall, and an exit on the ceiling. Walk into the entrance and you'll be released through the exit. Easy. Except it's dizzying, complex and hugely entertaining. In the scenarios demonstrated, the player dropped an entrance portal under a box, and the exit above a gun-turret – the box knocked over the turret. There was a task where, to flick a switch, a box had to be flung through a hole in a wall – but to reach that hole, the player had to jet out from an exit 60 feet in the air. Place an entrance below an exit and you'll create an infinite loop – one hilarious display of perpetual motion saw the same gun-turret bouncing up and down from entrance to exit.

The levels are meant as a recruitment/test chamber, and the trailer doubled as an orientation video. "Remember our company motto 'There's a hole in the sky, through which things can fly,'" and: "At the test centre, we have discovered that a motivated individual can carry out intense tasks while enduring intense pain" will no doubt find their way on to T-shirts within weeks.

If *Portal* feels familiar, that's because it is: it's the brainchild of students attending the game development course at the Digipen Instutute of Technology near Seattle . Their first effort, *Narbacular Drop*, won the student showcase award at this year's Independent Games Festival, four months later, and working at Valve, they debut this trailer. That's quite a turnaround.



This provocative image sets the tone, of *HL2: Episode 2*. Alyx falls from a collapsing bridge, and her fate is in the hands of the Vortigaunts – the alien race once enslaved to the Combine











WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

With the unceremonious closure of exhaustive Japanese sales figures site Shrine of Data (Website Of The Month, E149), armchair forum pundits hoping to make their qualitative arguments ring on a strictly by-the-numbers basis have been reduced to cobbling together data from various sources or, worse, forming actual coherent arguments.

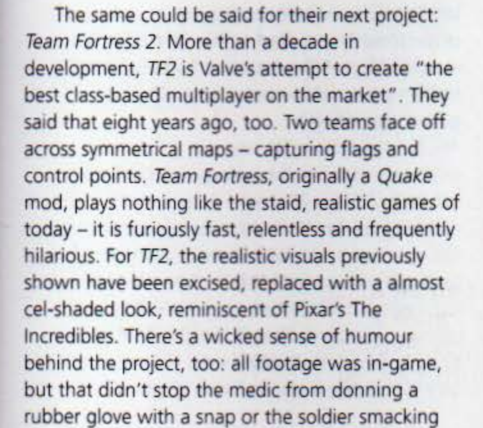
Luckily for them, those days may be numbered with the recent launch of videogamecharts.com, a more western-centric site attempting to achieve a full one-stop visit for cumulative hardware sales since launch, top selling US games over the past decade and tracking of Media Create's weekly top ten Japanese software sales.

Though still a work in progress playing catch-up since the Shrine's fall, it's off to a racing start, and that line-graph blip showing Xbox 360's 100k sales lead on GameCube in their respective eight months since launch is surely underscoring the point of someone, somewhere, at this very moment.



Site: VideoGameCharts
URL: http://videogamecharts.com





The same could be said for their next project: *Team Fortress 2*. More than a decade in development, *TF2* is Valve's attempt to create "the best class-based multiplayer on the market". They said that eight years ago, too. Two teams face off across symmetrical maps – capturing flags and control points. *Team Fortress*, originally a *Quake* mod, plays nothing like the staid, realistic games of today – it is furiously fast, relentless and frequently hilarious. For *TF2*, the realistic visuals previously shown have been excised, replaced with a almost cel-shaded look, reminiscent of Pixar's The Incredibles. There's a wicked sense of humour behind the project, too: all footage was in-game, but that didn't stop the medic from donning a rubber glove with a snap or the soldier smacking on his tin-helmet with a shovel.

In a remarkable fit of generosity, both *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal* will be given to PC gamers alongside *Episode 2*. What comes next, however, is nothing short of astonishing. Valve is to release the entire *Half-Life 2* saga, *Half-Life 2*, *Episode 1* and *Episode 2*, for the 360 and PlayStation 3 in a single package. *Portal* and *Team Fortress 2* are also in the same box, paving the way for the online delivery of the third chapter. Conventional wisdom has long maintained that episodic content can't work on consoles but Valve, as ever, seem more interested in breaking new ground than settling old arguments.





Alongside *Half-Life 2: Episode 1* (above), the upcoming console release of *Half-Life 2* will include the long-awaited *Team Fortress 2* (top) as well as all the main story episodes. *TF2*, once a class-based multiplayer take on gritty modern warfare, now sports an attractive cartoon-ish, not-quite cel-shaded look



"Unfortunately, the draw put me against an Israeli player and due to our stand against the Israeli aggression and occupation of Palestine, I raised my voice and said there was no way I was going to play against this guy. I know I am losing my title but I am standing for our cause."
Badr Hakeem, winner of last year's Electronics Sports World Cup, explains his decision to drop out of the running for this year's contest.

"Mark, you're out to lunch on this."
IGDA director Jason Della Rocca speaks – or rather shouts out – for the room during Mark Rein's Develop keynote on episodic games.

"If Sony does not change its current strategy for the PS3 the system will probably end up in third place in installed base"
Analysts DFC Intelligence take 600 pages to prove they haven't been speaking to many 15-year olds lately.

"Dying is no longer annoying... it's fun!"
The back of *Prey*'s box takes as cheesy a tone as the game's dialogue, as it promises its MIND BLOWING PUZZLES will MESS WITH YOUR MIND!

INTERVIEW

From Camelot to Redwood

Massively multiplayer gaming's dark horse, Mythic, has recently joined the EA stable – and brought Warhammer with it

Mythic Entertainment CEO **Mark Jacobs** has been working with online RPGs since the early '80s, though for many 2001's *Dark Age Of Camelot* will be the most immediately recognisable. Post-*Camelot*, Mythic began production on a Roman empire sci-fi, *Imperator*, before shelving the project and dedicating itself to *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* (the licence's second attempt at entering the MMO space, after an aborted UK effort from Climax). With both company and game having been recently acquired by EA, we talked to Jacobs during the publisher's July press showcase.

"I can't take credit for saying: 'I knew this would all happen!' but I did always believe in it. I loved competing online, and I just couldn't imagine other people not feeling the same"

You started today's presentation by saying you've always believed in online gaming. How hard was it to keep the faith 20 years before the current boom?
I really enjoyed the experience of online games, even back then, and also – no matter how I say this it's going to sound silly – I saw the future, from looking at what we could do and trying to imagine what it would be like in ten or 20 years. That said, I didn't think it would take as long as it did, so I can't take credit for saying: 'I knew this would all happen in 2001!' but I did always believe in it. I loved competing online, and I just couldn't imagine other people not feeling the same way.


For all the bluster of a press event, it was Jacobs (above) who painted one of the most convincing pictures of EA's reassessed creative direction, quelling fears that Mythic would be subsumed

Obviously massively multiplayer gaming's slow growth was tied to the pricing and accessibility of the internet, but could the industry have done more to make the genre appealing?
Yes, we could have. EA was one of the few publishers that had the courage to spend the money on *Ultima* [*Online*] – if more companies had done that earlier, it would have happened faster. But they didn't. We had *Meridian 59*, then nothing, nothing, nothing until *UO*. If when *Meridian* came out other publishers had rushed in with good games... It really took until *EverQuest* to bring enough people in, because even *UO* was seen as only succeeding because it was *Ultima*.

How did that climate affect *Dark Age Of Camelot*'s creation?
I begged every publisher in the industry to do a deal with us, *every* single one, and they all said no. The only way we got to do *Camelot* was that I was willing to sell 33 per cent of my company to Abandon Entertainment, and when they put up the money I went back to every single publisher asking for a distribution deal – including EA, more than once – and every one again said no, until Vivendi. My favourite 'no' story – I won't mention the company's name, Disney, because it'd be insulting to them – we approached them as a European partner, and their VP said to me with a straight face: 'But Mark, I don't see why you think Europeans would play *Dark Age Of Camelot*.' It had been a really long day, so I said: 'You do understand that *Camelot* is a European myth, right?' And there went that deal.

At least critically, Imperator seemed set to build on *Camelot*'s success – what halted development?
Imperator was a great concept that started to get away from us, and I take responsibility for that. At E3 the press would like it, but post-E3 I wasn't feeling a buzz about the game. Mythic survived as an independent for 11 years, and one of the ways

we survived was by not doing anything stupid. Not all of our games were hits – and in the online space a hit wouldn't mean much, especially back then – but what sinks independents are the games they shouldn't have done. So I thought: 'If I'm wrong, and *Imperator* is a bomb, we're going to endanger *Warhammer*, Mythic and my employees,' and I wasn't going to do that. I want to revisit it in time, because there are great bits there – but it's not a great game yet.

Has *Warhammer Online* been buoyed by the renaissance in Warhammer-licensed PC titles recently?

I love the IP, and I really like the Games Workshop guys: they're gracious, they're dedicated gamers, they love their baby. A lot of licensors control their IP with an iron fist, but GW are willing to talk to you about it, because even though they control Warhammer, they also *love* it.

Warhammer's been in the States for over two decades – I think its time has come now. Any IP has a time, and longstanding IPs have multiple times: five years ago you might have thought Lord Of The Rings wasn't all that popular, but then it came around again. And that was because of great products – you can also get into psychology about how the sense of evil in the world resonated with people more deeply now than before, but they were great products. So now it's up to us to do our job.

Are you concerned that some gamers feel the MMO market – if not the wider gaming market – is saturated with high fantasy?

I think a lot of gamers look at all the great standalone console games and think: 'I'd love to play that as an MMO', without thinking *how* that would play. Right now high fantasy – well, fantasy in general, as Tolkien traditionally is low fantasy – is simply easier to do, for people to get their heads around both as players and as designers. It took

Blizzard has already blazed Warhammer's artistic trail, but *Age Of Reckoning*'s more licence-fitting take quickly comes into its own. Mythic's skill in player-army combat should also even the odds

time to learn the core competencies and build up variety in every gaming genre, and right now in the MMO space it's not necessarily the best way to do things by branching out with something more difficult.

And how about gamers' perceptions of EA acquisitions?

EA knew what it wanted to do with Mythic – it wasn't: 'Hey, you're a great company, let's buy you and figure out what to do later', but about both sides seeing how they fit together and where they were going next. I didn't want someone to buy us, or even buy into us, who didn't know why they were doing it: I've turned down deals with other companies for more money than EA paid, because we like how these guys are thinking.

So you sense a change from EA's darker days in the online space – failed projects such as *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin, The Sims Online* or *Majestic*?

History is a great teacher if you pay attention to it, and EA knows they've made mistakes. What really helped turn things around is that they now play online games a *lot*. I've had many conversations over the years with people who think they understand the market, but when I ask: 'What do you play?' they say: 'Oh, I don't *play* any games, I've done research.' But what kind of research have you done if you don't even play the games?

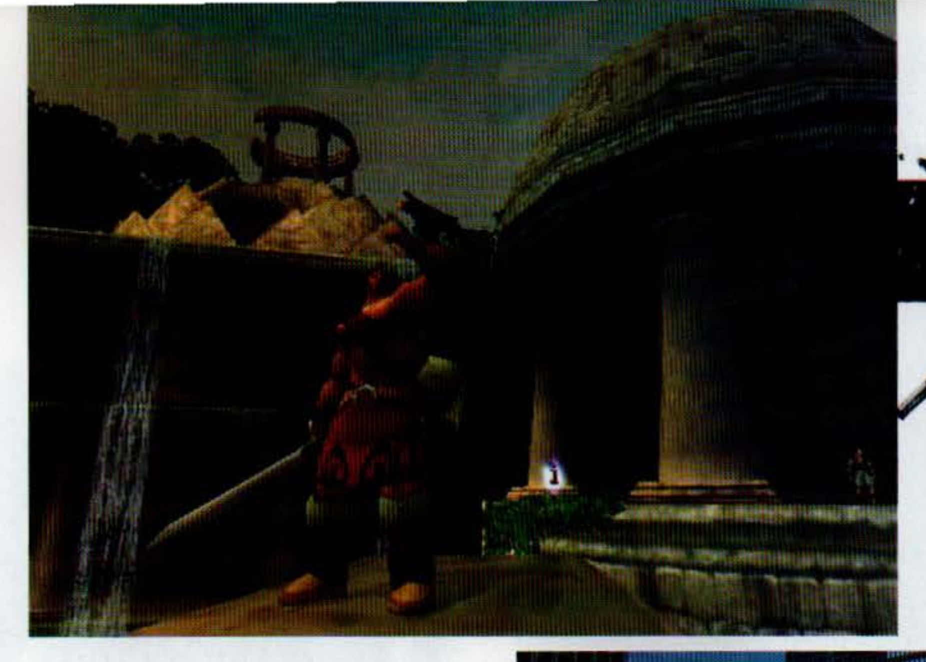
OUT THERE



JOYSTICK ELONGATION

While singleplayer gaming's eulogy has not fully been read, in the experimental and academic new media fields collaborative and multiplayer gaming in all its forms are the almost exclusive space for exploration. In a turn that would do Claes Oldenburg proud, artist Mary Flanagan has turned collaborative gaming into a true group effort with her [giantJoystick], a nine-foot tall Atari 2600 version of just that. Intended as commentary on the physicality of interface in everyday game interactions, [giantJoystick] is a fully functional way to control retro games by physically climbing on and manipulating the stick and buttons through collective performances. Think of it as an older and even more cumbersome brother to G4TV's giant NES pad and a similarly absurdist way to rethink how we play together.

● http://maryflanagan.com



INTERVIEW

Secret agents

Why shouldn't developers be represented just like movie stars?

We're used to the idea of creative talent – a writer or actor, say – having an agent to manage their careers and watch their bank balance. So why not game-makers? Interactive Studio Management was founded in 1996 by a small team of industry veterans to try to bridge the gap between developers and publishers – talent spotting, deal negotiating and problem solving. Ten years on, with tensions between the people who make the game and the people who pay for the game still endemic, we sat down with agents **Stewart Kosoy** and **Francois Masciopinto** to ask about the third way.



Deep Red, developer of *Tycoon City: New York*, is another of ISM's clients. Bottlerocket, a new studio formed from core team members from *The Mark Of Kri* games (top left) are another new signing

What does a game agent do?

Stewart Kosoy: I'll start with the placing a deal part of it. A recent example is one of our clients, Digital Illusions. When they started work on *Battlefield*, they invested money in their own tech, and tried to come up with an original IP and sell it, and they couldn't do it. They called us, and we sat down with them and looked at their pitch. Because they'd been doing *Unreal*, they hadn't really needed to pitch before, so they didn't really understand how to do a proper pitch these days to get a $10 million-plus contract. And in a month we got them signed. Most developers are working two years frantically trying to get things done and then a month or two before the end of that project they're like: 'Oh my god, what are we going to do next, I've got 50 people to feed.' When you have a 50-person team and you need to feed them while it takes six months to close a deal – and that's six months if everybody says yes – whatever you've saved is gone. So we start bugging our clients six to eight months before they finish up, to make sure the next thing is ready.



Silicon Knights, the maker of *Metal Gear Solid: Twin Snakes*, is one of ISM's oldest clients. Kosoy reckons that publisher buy-outs or investments, as in Silicon Knights' relationship with Nintendo, is often the best solution in the long run for independent developers

How big a difference does your involvement in a project make?

SK: Right now, I think the industry is running at about 35 per cent cancellations, and our clients are running at around 20 per cent. There have been times when our client thinks everything's just fine and the publisher thinks everything's just fine, and we look at it – because we've done this for a long time – and we go: [draws breath in] 'There's a wall, and you're going to hit it in about four months.' And they say: 'Nah, everything's fine', and the publisher says: 'Everything's fine', and we've actually dropped the dime, and called whoever's running product development and said: 'Hey, we see a wall. And surprises aren't good. So let's sit down and work through this so that we don't hit that wall, because it's a lot easier to divert now than when it's right in front of you.' And we've saved projects that way.

What kind of walls do these projects most often hit? Is it design problems or management problems?

SK: It's production stuff. On another case we had a client working on a project for 360 launch, and they kept on telling the publisher: 'We're going to make it, but it would be better if we had three more months.' And when you say that to a publisher, they hear: 'We're going to make it, *bldlbdldblbldbldb*' – they don't hear that 'three





Battlefield 1942 is one of the jewels in ISM's crown, having negotiated both a publishing deal for the game – which EA had previously rejected – and the publisher's stake in developers DICE

more months'. And in this particular case it turned out the president and senior VP of the publisher were going to the parent company to commit to launch, and commit the marketing money, etcetera, so I called the internal producers into a room, and three hours later we came up with the reality that either we were going to cut 30 per cent out of the game, which would not be a game that we could sell, or we were going to be late. And I said: 'OK, who makes the call?' And nobody wanted to because they were all afraid the publisher was going to start yelling. So I called the guy up, and said: 'Do you want me to tell you what you want to hear, or what I think is real?' He said tell me what's real. And yeah, there was a big cascade of yelling – but before they spent the marketing money, and before they put their necks out and got chopped off and ended up losing their jobs, and they got the three extra months and it turned into a profitable project for everybody.

"The problem with relying on internal staff is that the first thing you learn in corporate politics is you don't raise the issue if you don't have an answer"

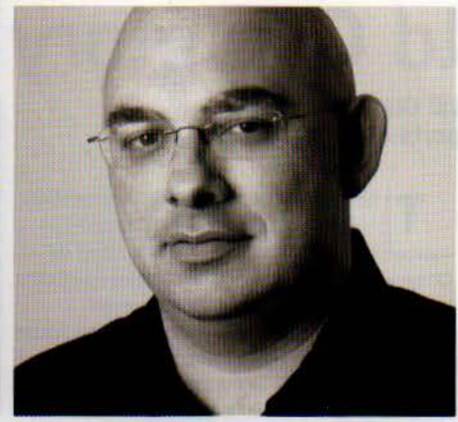
What's the need for an external firm in these situations? Aren't these the kinds of problems that producers are supposed to manage?

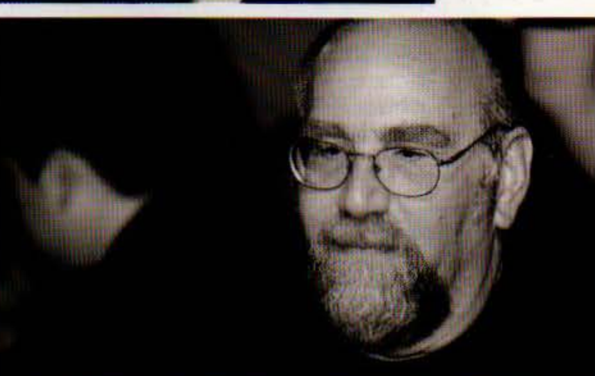
Francois Masciopinto: First of all, you have to define what a producer is! That would be a really good start. If you think about it, there's a left brain and a right brain, and most producers these days are being asked to be both brains – very creative and very organised. Which most of the time doesn't work. It's very scary when you think about $10 million in the hands of a guy who just got out of college... You have some guys who come up to be very good producers, very technically skilled people with a lot of creativity and wide disciplines, but that's very rare. What we should have is a position like what the Japanese call a 'game planner' – the guy who's here to say we have to reach this milestone and no, you can't swap blue and green here, you can't change the layout of the buttons, because then we're going to be late. He's the guy who's behind the vision – he's not the designer, but he's the guy behind the game designer. Then you'd have the executive producer, who, like in the movie business, would look at the finance. Then you have the producer and the director, who look at the creative direction. Some companies are trying to do that, but they went overboard, and are starting to put four, five, six, nine producers on a game, which doesn't work either, because nobody feels responsible, no one is held responsible.

SK: The problem with relying on internal staff is that the first thing you learn in corporate politics is you don't raise the issue if you don't have an answer – because your job is there to do that, and if you don't know how to fix a problem you're basically saying: 'Hey, you're paying me whatever you're paying me, and I don't have a clue.' And that means things don't get fixed.

So if publishers and developers were better at all elements of their jobs, would there be no need for ISM?

SK: [Laughs] Well, obviously it's in my interests to say we'll always need a third party. But even when the publisher does everything right, and the developer does everything right and they deliver a product, it's still really hard to get ahead. It's a very fickle market. There'll always be difficult negotiations, and that means there's always the risk of underlying hostility. If we're involved, then I'm the bad guy dealing with that, and everyone else can get on with the job.




Stewart Kosoy (above) and Francois Masciopinto (top) both have long histories in the game industry. ISM's small staff have more than 100 years of experience between them

Newswire

Newly Weds

The mysteriously lengthy drought affecting 360's Live Arcade has been brought to a close. The 'Summer of Arcade' is seeing a new title appear on Marketplace each Wednesday throughout the bulk of July and August. The stream began with *Frogger* on July 12, on to *Cloning Clyde*, *Galaga* and *Street Fighter II' Hyper Fighting* (above) and is planned to end with *Pac-Man* on August 9. *Texas Hold 'Em* is also pencilled in for August 23.

Given that this line-up arrived just as 360's full-price software stream ran dry, only to begin trickling again in the Autumn, it's maybe not that mysterious a drought after all.



As in the football World Cup, the US failed to dominate – or indeed win any of the categories



World Cup glory for Brazil

But France still dominates the world of E-Sports on its home turf

The home advantage seemed to pay off for France at this year's E-Sports World Cup, held at the start of July in the Palais de Omnisport in Bercy, Paris. French players and teams won all but two of the tournament's seven categories, including *Quake 4*, *Pro Evolution Soccer 5* and the new *Trackmania Nations ESWC* – designed by Nadeo and the ESWC organisers specifically for the event. It would have been hard not to be spurred on by the overwhelmingly French audience's encouragement: around 6,000 spectators filled the stalls, banging their free inflatable Nvidia batons together in excitement whenever their countrymen came close to victory.

No French teams came close to the lucrative *Counter-Strike* final, however. The $52,000 (£28, 417) prize was snatched by newcomers Made In Brazil, a team who'd formed just four months previously but resoundingly trounced Swedish favourites Fnatic. The match being held the day after France played Brazil in a better-known World Cup, the crowd's favour was firmly with the Swedes, and the stadium was virtually empty before MIB's post-game interview was over. They attribute their victory to intensive training, studying replays of their opponents' games ahead of time and the fact that the final was played out on their strongest map: de_inferno.



The *Counter-Strike* tournament was a close-run thing, with no team making it through without a draw or a loss. South Korea took the *WarCraft 3* cup, while France swept the board at *Gran Turismo 4*, taking first, second and third places as well as winning the women's *Counter-Strike* prize among many other victories

Continue

Cardboard
Bit Generations makes boxes collectable again

Rubber
But not as collectable as *LocoRoco* keyrings

Jelly
Seeing Jar-Jar drowned in goo is gaming heaven

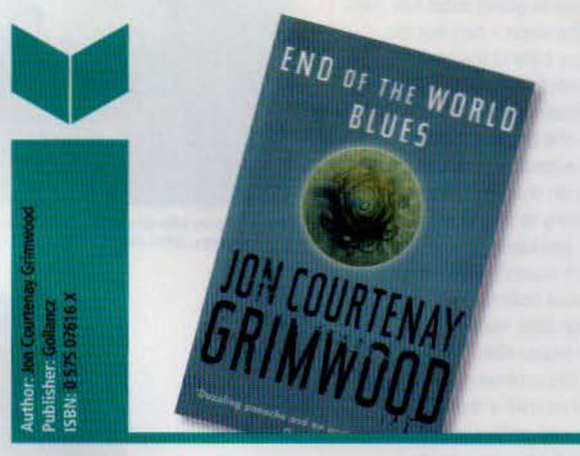
Quit



Pay to play
Why is buying mobile games still a nightmare?

Wait to play
How can PS3 and Wii still be so far off?

Bake to play
The Lite can stand the sun's glare, but can we?



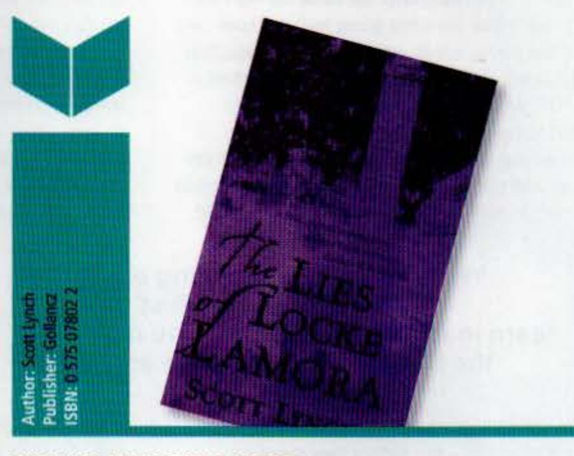
Author: Jon Courtenay Grimwood
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07616 X

END OF THE WORLD BLUES

Tokyo is the metaphor for rivalry, redemption and dislocation in Grimwood's latest parallelised sci-fi noir

It's characteristic of Jon Courtenay Grimwood's work that End Of The World Blues is chopped together with alternative narratives from the mean streets of current day Shinjunku, mixed with those from vestigial families of the future living in floating castles high above a blasted Earth. Holding this bifurcation in place is Lady Neku, who despite locking $15 million in cash into a Tokyo station locker, is living in doorways and on the kindness of strangers. Somehow she's forgotten what happened during her wedding, which was designed to unite those warring families, but didn't quite work out. Instead she ends up saving the life of Kit Nouveau, ex-British Army sniper seeking some sort of redemption through heroin and his increasingly dysfunctional marriage to a bondage-obsessed potter, whose delicate pots sell around the world.

As might be expected, he's got plenty of demons to overcome; a situation only made worse when his bar is firebombed and the Yakuza warn him to leave the country. Neku is even more confused as she timeslips between Tokyo and her own sentient castle which, being built out of a giant snail, is slowly climbing to the top of a mountain thousands of years in the future. And perhaps it's this combination of showy details with breakneck pace, and the occasional authorial sleight of hand, that means End Of The World Blues never quite lives up to its potential. Still, as a summer page turner, it certainly hits a spot.



Author: Scott Lynch
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07802 2

THE LIES OF LOCKE LAMORA

A surprisingly skilful swashbuckling debut signals the next big thing in fantasy writing

As an example of literary serendipity, Scott Lynch's story is the sort that marketeers sell their kids to work on. Previously a freelance writer for role-playing games, the 20-something fell into a six figure book deal thanks to an editor who came across his blog, and signed up the work-in-progress. Even before it's been released, the book's a commercial smash with international rights snapped up and the film options signed to Warner Bros. Good thing then that The Lies Of Locke Lamora, the first in a series entitled the Gentleman Bastards, stands up to the hype. Throwing you into the deep end of a fully-formed fantasy world, the parenthood of the Gentlemen in question is, in fact, more tragic than their title would suggest. Five orphans who have coalesced into one of the thieving gangs that infest the mercurial city of Camorr, their long apprenticeship in the Holy Order of Perelandro has knitted them into something special; a band of tricksters with a taste for the high-rolling sting. For, in the gloriously hyper-realistic manner of such loveable rogues, money isn't the Gentlemen's goal. It's just their way of keeping score. But as their search for targets moves higher up the aristocratic ladder of society, so the little gang comes to the attention of darker forces and they find themselves unwilling pawns in wider machinations. And even if the endgame is never in doubt, it doesn't mean the delicate unravelling of Lynch's complicated plotlines is any less enjoyable.

God Of War II

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SCEA



It still feels like the day after the fight before, with simmering action and settings draped in the same speckled haze, but it's hard to spite a sequel that moves so smoothly and thinks so big

Small Arms

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



From *Fuzzy Fever* developer Gastronaut, XBLA gets its *Smash Brothers Meleé*, and the first ever viral Achievement – one that starts with the game's creators and is transmitted via online play

Project Sylph

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX



Even more drama seems to exist in the gameplay presentation of GameArts' *Silpheed* successor than in cutscenes, with on-screen enemies gathering in their hundreds to provide a next-gen thrust

Ridge Racers 2

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO BANDAI



An improved 3D engine breathes life into the PlayStation era's killer tracks, with the 42-track total featuring those of *Rage Racer* and *Type 4*. New modes include Arcade, Duel and Survival

Trusty Bell: Dream Of Chopin

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



Interesting in many ways: for simply being a JPRG on 360, for its score by pianist Stanislav Bunin, for its offbeat premise (the clue's in the title), and for taking 360 visuals in a charismatic direction

Mutant Storm Empire

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Broadening its amphibious gene-pool to include larger and more elaborate bosses, *Empire* brings its arenas together into themed world: each room connected by a door, each world distinctive

Red Steel

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Having almost died by its swordplay at E3, Ubisoft's launch title is reportedly back on the drawing board with precious months to spare, trying to get a better handle on that Freehand controller

LA Noire

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SONY



Narrative and art are the worries in a game that's long publicised its next-gen technical credentials. Will a huge budget get Team Bondi away from its founder's claim to infamy, *The Getaway*?

Fatal Inertia

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



Set to become one of the titles charged with justifying PS3's day one price tag, the *Quantum Redshift*-alike continues to alarm with its cumbersome pace and weightless, boilerplate vehicles

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Super Serif Brothers

http://www.foon.co.uk/farcade/ssb/

Like *NetHack* gone platformer or a gold-collecting *Rogue Runner*, the latest from Foon, creators of the perilous *Hapland* series, is an exercise in abstracted ASCII exploration.

As you'd expect, each character in *Super Serif*'s world represents a unique object that can be interacted with, crawled on or manipulated in some way, but Foon's twist is that apart from collecting £s and making your way through to the exit E, understanding the rest, note the instructions, "is up to you."

A level editor allows for more open experimentation and, being simple text, creating a level is as easy as typing it in the supplied box or cutting and pasting from your own text editor, and your creations can be saved to the Level Pit to be played and ranked by the wider community.

Though not as physical and reactive as Metanet's similarly minimalist *N*, *SSB* allows for exceptional creative freedom and some deviously prepared puzzles, and is a welcome addition to Foon's growing lineup of smart browser-based games.



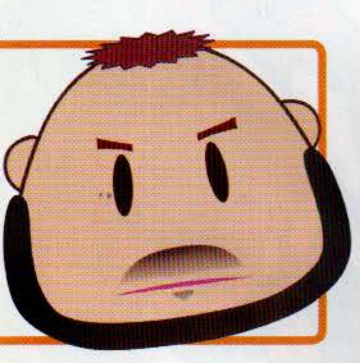


SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Test your mind, a national hobby

Game producer Brick Bardo examines Japan's obsession with tests



These days, the concept of 'tests' is very popular in Japan. They have become a kind of hobby. You can take a test about your knowledge of Kyoto, The Kyoto Test, and another about Tokyo: The Tokyo City Guide Test. There is a sommelier test for whisky called Whisky Connoisseur, one about obscure movies and, this is incredible but true, the Akashi Tako Test which tests your knowledge of fish and octopuses. Some of these tests sound crazy, but they still remain based in reality. The National Otaku Test, however, wants to establish the greatest otaku of all.

For some, the tests are like competitions that are structured in levels and diplomas, but from other people's perspectives they look meaningless and not very useful. Of course, they are used at work as they testify to a certain level of knowledge and they are a means of establishing official recognition of how much you know about your chosen field.

Let's be honest, these tests on movies or games can have no impact on your professional life. While some companies may require the movie test, their argument is not really solid. And anyway: a test does not come for free. Taking one may cost from a few thousand yen up to several tens of thousands. To get to the next rank in a given field, you need to take another test.The otaku test is more about knowing who knows the most should you need to know anything about, for example, animation – or saying: "I heard that this guy knows everything abut games". There is no official diploma or levels for it and no outside companies or association deciding how the test works. It is more like an ongoing competition.

I don't know about other countries around the world, but in Japan people are very interested in tests. In a way, they give people a feeling of certainty, of safety. However, they are not really interested in becoming an expert but prefer to be identified by their level.

Most Japanese hate being identified by rank and prefer the idea of a grade. This may sound the same, but a rank is of course part of a hierarchy – you have to say that you've come 85th in a national test. But when you talk about grades, this designates a group. When someone says he successfully passed rank two of a test, so have many other people – he is part of a group. Of course, at the same time, you get people who work hard to be in the national top ten for a test.

Like the Japanese word karaoke, the word otaku has entered into other languages and is used in many countries around the world I believe the time is not far off when an international otaku test will take place

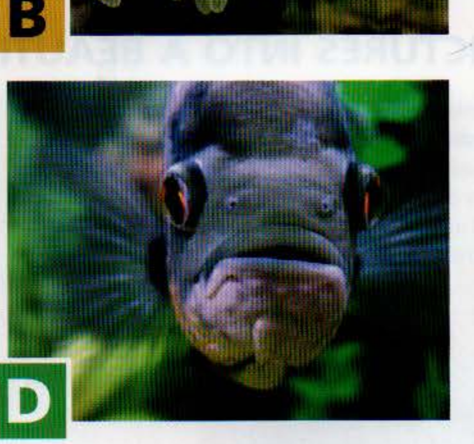
They usually don't mind being identified by their rank, but the vast majority of people don't.

This grade concept is very apparent in gaming. For instance, you have a tradition of being given a grade at the end of a game. In Japan, most games do this. Another illustration is the very popular *Brain Training* from Nintendo, where you don't get a nationwide ranking but a classification based on the perceived age of your brain.

Earlier this year, the very first movie test took place, and a large number of candidates entered it. As for the national otaku test, it ended in failure









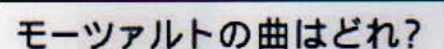


Knowledge of fish, octopuses and whisky can be tested at a national level in Japan, and many aficionados invest in taking the exams so they can boast of their expertise. Now there's a games test, too

(actually, it did not even make it to the end) as the test was too easy and the otaku were very offended by it. But there is a very high probability that a new test for otaku will come out.

The other day, the Japan Expo took place in Paris and many otaku from all over Europe gathered there. The event was even featured in the news in Japan, and I must admit it was funny to see western cosplayers on television! I'm not an expert on the otaku, but it was obvious that this expo was incredibly popular. It is also true that, like the Japanese word karaoke, the word otaku has entered into other languages and is used in many countries around the world. I believe the time is not far off when an international otaku test will take place.

Now, to the point: imagine you are developing a game and a guy answers a job application, saying: "I have passed level two of the Otaku Test". What are you going to do? Imagine you have two people who have the same level of skill but one is telling you that he has passed level two of the test. Which one are you going to pick? Well, personally, I would not hesitate. I would employ the one who has not passed the test!









Roughly translating as 'Everything You Wanted To Ask But Didn't Dare: Common Sense Training DS' is Nintendo's plan for combining one Japanese craze – for national tests – with another, namely its own *Brain Training* games. The thought of it outselling the latter is humbling

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Tony Hawk's Project 8



The prospect of fundamental reinvention instead of incremental revision – yep, even after all this time – is alluring. Will its ideas graduate on all formats, though?
PS2, PS3, PSP, XBOX, 360, ACTIVISION

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy



An entire transitional period of next-gen chestbeating has passed since the original, and so a second helping of its cheery faces and stress-free play seems doubly neat
MULTI, LUCASARTS

The Club



Bizarre Creations' killing gameshow feels like the ideal antidote to the skybox whores and foliage bores of the FPS genre. One thing – can we have Cone Challenges, please?
PS3, 360, SEGA

UglyBeautiful

Those infuriating car ads might be on to something



Spongebob Squarepants is, on paper, spectacularly unappealing, but his vast commercial success has proven that both children and adults warm to unconventional characters. Why don't games try the same trick?

Take a look on page 44 and you'll see something nasty. The unpleasantness isn't just that Tingle – the Jar-Jar Binks of the *Zelda* series – is getting his own game. Nor is it the fact that Nintendo is focusing an entire game around his insatiable greed for grubby rupees. No, what's nasty is the art: no cherubic grins and cute colours – not even the wide-eyed charms of the Pikmin. Instead, thick, brash colours outline the fat face of one of gaming's least loved idiot sons; his swollen red nose tips his goggle-eyed face into a leer. He's almost the diametric opposite of Disney's famous guide to 'The Cute Character': big ears, big nose, small forehead. Bulging bum and close-set eyes. Has Nintendo lost the plot?

Of course not. Indeed, it's the natural extension of the treatment that worked so well with the reinvention of Wario. Tingle's new art style has an energy and identity lacking in much of the more conservative character design which is commonplace in gaming. And it caters very well to a trend that games seem weirdly oblivious to. Take a tour around the archives of a channel like The Cartoon Network or Nicktoons and you'll find a roster of deformed, deranged and disquieting misfits. But these characters aren't left-field darlings, they're massive mainstream hits. From the days of Ren And Stimpy onwards, animators have woken up to the fact that the world at large loves a freak.

Games, of course, have a few flag-bearers for ugly love. The Elebits, featured on page 38, are a part of this trend. But mostly, it's something that's yet to be capitalised on – a surprise realisation that gamer tastes are actually more restrained than mainstream tastes. And, interestingly, it seems to be something that western developers are less eager to embrace than their eastern counterparts – an interesting contradiction since it's often western animators who branch out with particularly peculiar visions of their own.

More interestingly, it might provide an answer for the old question of why no one's managed to create a real gaming icon since Mario, Sonic and Lara. Perhaps it'll take some brazenly ugly design and some defiantly inept execution to attract the attention of the world once again.

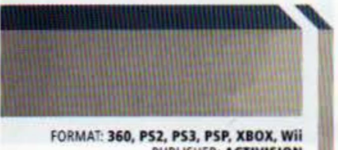












FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3, PSP, XBOX, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006 (Wii TBC)**

Call Of Duty 3

Treyarch hears the call, and marches Call Of Duty through the Normandy mud to make a decisive strike on console shooting



Multiplayer – as yet only confirmed for PS3 and 360 – will have a 24-player cap, new game modes, a character class system and multi-occupancy vehicles. Treyarch seems to be well aware that *Call Of Duty 2's* competitive offering fell short, and has a dedicated team working full-time on it



Call Of Duty has come a long way via multiple routes, mirroring the exhaustive globetrotting of the games themselves as they've dotted around the European and North African theatres of World War Two. Infinity Ward's 2003 PC hit spawned a series of increasingly successful console offshoots, and its sequel last year straddled the gap, with the 360 launch-day port becoming the biggest FPS – in fact, the biggest game – on the format. That gives the series tremendous leverage, and Activision is acting fast to gather its efforts in a unified assault. So *Call Of Duty 3* has one developer (Treyarch, the talented internal team of *Spider-Man* and *Call Of Duty 2: Big Red One*), one setting (the Allied offensive in Normandy of the summer of 1944) and, in an unpopular break with its roots, is exclusive to consoles. The intent is clearly to repeat the trick with the PS3 launch, and indeed *Call Of Duty 3* looks like one of the safest bets of a still uncertain line-up.

We've slogged up Omaha beach before, of course, but *Call Of Duty 3* concentrates on the subsequent two-month campaign, the bloodiest of the whole war, right up to the liberation of Paris – naturally, all in thunderous, cinematic style. Early and late highlights will be the Allied break-out at the pulverised town of Saint-Lô, and the decisive battle for the Falaise gap. Reflecting the breadth of Allied commitment to the offensive, you will assume the roles of a US army infantryman, a British SAS officer, a member of the Canadian mechanised infantry and a Polish tank commander from a 13,000-strong brigade of British-based exiles. These strands will offer the various playing styles they suggest, and doubtless, various national flavours of chest-swelling, soldierly drama.

If Treyarch is bringing one thing to the game, it's sheer proximity: to the enemy, to explosions, to the gun in your hands. A demonstration of the US assault on Saint-Lô has an impressively pressured, claustrophobic atmosphere, starting with a grisly headshot on one of your companions inches from your face as you regain consciousness after an explosion, and continuing with a harried push through a graveyard, Germans flanking you under cover and at fairly close range. The constant barrage on the senses from air bombardment is almost too much, but the elegant depth-of-field blurring and extreme close-up effects when you sight a weapon are strikingly convincing, and the

The constant barrage on the senses is almost too much, but the elegant depth-of-field and extreme close-up effects when you sight a weapon are strikingly convincing



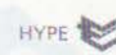




This simple Battle Actions struggle recalls the knife fights in *Resi 4*; we're promised more elaborate scenarios, including defusing a bomb, or opening the hatch of a German tank and popping a grenade in

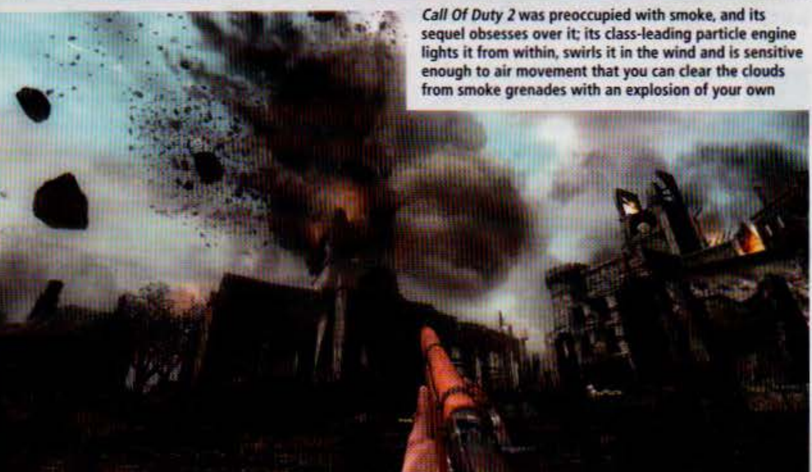


The view when taking aim has a tremendous, tactile authenticity – subtle blurring around your target gives it a better sense of distance and concentration than most

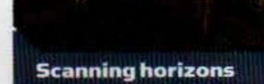








Call Of Duty 2 was preoccupied with smoke, and its sequel obsesses over it; its class-leading particle engine lights it from within, swirls it in the wind and is sensitive enough to air movement that you can clear the clouds from smoke grenades with an explosion of your own



Scanning horizons

With a (presumably) generous budget but a fast turnaround, Treyarch has thrown every available technological resource behind its art team. Ensemble motion capture was used for the actors to get better performances in less time for the in-engine cutscenes that mask loading. Many assets, including guns, tanks and uniforms, were built semi-automatically from models, or the real thing, using 3D scanning technology developed by NASA to check space shuttles for cracks. Given the huge thirst for detail of the new consoles, expect to see other cash-rich and time-poor projects opting for the real-world settings that suit this technique in future.

tighter level design should suit *Call Of Duty*'s essentially linear shoot.

Branching paths are promised, as well as a greater degree of control over the vehicular sections, and some limited environmental persistence – destructible cover and tracks left in grass, the latter having intriguing possibilities in multiplayer. But these pay mere lip-service to player influence, while Treyarch's principal addition to the *Call Of Duty* template is in the area of tightly scripted, in-your-face cinematic craft: 'Battle Actions', a QTE-style system for close-quarters combat. The simple example so far shown (hammer triggers to grapple with an enemy soldier who lunges at you from a doorway) didn't break from firstperson but nonetheless seemed a little jarring; these moments need to be totally seamless, and blessed with old-fashioned good timing, to work well. They would present an ideal opportunity to use the PS3 pad's motion sensors, but Activision can't yet confirm or deny any such plans, or indeed anything that will distinguish that version from the 360's.

It goes without saying that the Wii will require a much more thorough overhaul, and of this little is known, but a bespoke game is promised. Treyarch is taking its time to pitch the graphical quality, configure the controls (including the obvious potential to intensify those close-combat set pieces) and tailor the content to suit. It will follow the spirit if not the letter of the 360/PS3 game – the same goes for the Xbox and PS2 versions – and it will most likely follow them all at some distance next year. If anything, that delay indicates that Activision is taking the debut of this important franchise on the new Nintendo seriously. More seriously, we would guess, than the PSP game; as is the depressing trend with cross-platform releases for the Sony handheld, it is being made separately, and is not spoken of.

That version aside, all signs point to another solid, thoroughly researched, populist war epic, this one benefiting from a tight historical focus that might just lend some extra grit and gravitas to its portrayal of the war. The only people with cause for complaint will probably be PC shooter fans, who can now stick *Call Of Duty* under *Far Cry* in their list of home-grown hits gone AWOL.







Having a comrade's name and rank pop up when you look in their direction is a simple, sentimental device that adds emotional punch, but this is a battle you must fight alone, even when surrounded by others



FORMAT: **PSP, DS**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2006**

Gunpey Rebirth

After invigorating the block-switching puzzler with Lumines and Meteos, can Q make line-dancing cool?



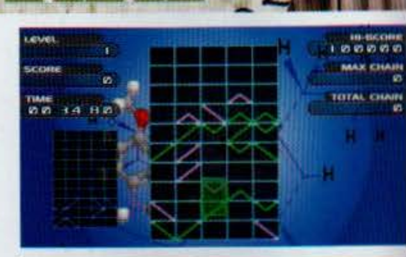
The line-matching mechanic in *Rebirth* isn't a new idea – it debuted with the WonderSwan handheld in 1999. *Gunpey* was named in honour of the handheld's creator Gunpei Yokoi, who died in 1997

It may have been a collaborative effort, but with *Nintety-Nine Nights*, Q Entertainment revealed its intention to move out of the boutique and to start playing along to a more traditional tune of videogame development. But since its colourful puzzlers have begun to corner a market as much as carve a niche – in the works are sequels (*Lumines 2/Live*), and a franchise-wrapped spin-off (*Meteos: Disney Edition*) – it's less of a surprise to see another puzzler, this time the continuation of a posthumous tribute to Nintendo's Game Boy designer, Gunpei Yokoi.

That isn't, of course, to sell the style (well, styles – see below) and structure of *Gunpey Rebirth* short as some kind of suspicious money-spinner, but more to regulate expectations of it. Angled lines climb up the screen within a grid, whose adjacent squares can be swapped in order to connect the lines, with the aim of creating a continuous path across all five columns of the field's width before an incomplete line can reach the top and end the game.

While that idea is common to both DS and PSP versions, there's a thick dividing line between the style of the two, a more exaggerated visual difference than that between the measured and chilly sharpness of *Lumines* and the warmth and violence of *Meteos'* strike-a-match blockbusting. Instantly visible in the game's respective logos, *Gunpey DS* is an effervescent colour-burst of breezy hues and childish heroes toting banjos with full-bore barrels and pink tiger-print guitars. *Gunpey PSP*, by contrast, is wilfully more artsy, a collection of themes that paint an overall character of style for style's sake rather than any recourse to cheery faces and outrageous musical instruments.

Coupled with Q's signature skill for SFX and music integration, there's no reason to think of either as anything less than a classily-executed prospect that'll likely continue – if not build upon – the engrossing, brainteasing hypnosis of its low-hype, high-praise puzzlers that have gone before.

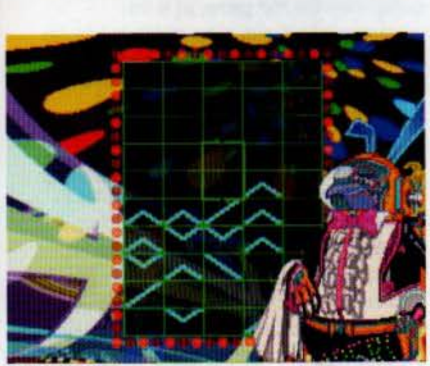




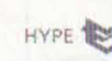
The skins of the PSP version (a total of 40 are on offer) are more animated than those of *Lumines*. Although as they feature names like Dice, The Afroman in Friday's Café and 9Lazy Kangaroo, it's hard not to draw comparisons with the aforementioned puzzler



It's not clear if there's to be any concession in terms of the respective control systems of either version of *Gunpey Rebirth*. The DS iteration would arguably enable slicker and more productive play via the stylus, but its appearance would suggest a puzzle game that isn't out to make too many demands of its players.









EA has still only released one screenshot from the game (left) – the other images are taken from a trailer – a rather worrying sign for a project which was originally timetabled for completion some months ago now



Superman Returns: The Videogame

Fashionably late for his own return, EA's Superman has the lights and camera, but not yet the action

Superman has had a rocky relationship with videogaming, not least because the medium risks rendering him unremarkable far more efficiently than any villain's plot. Flight, invincibility and limitless strength are all only a power-up or cheat code away from most game protagonists; and since Superman's last outing his honest heroism now seems hopelessly old-fashioned, with no mean streak, no smack talk, no Hot Coffee.

It's unsurprising, then, that Tiburon has made a game as much about Metropolis as Superman, both in terms of the game's hype – it's a broader, higher, busier city than any superhero game has attempted before – and in its mechanics, with the city's communal life bar standing in for Superman's own. As a film set, it's superb – and rocketing from street level to the peaks of its crystalline high-rises and back again (a more forceful, pavement-fracturing impact than Superman's traditional weightless alight is perhaps a sign of the times) ably communicates a sense of extraordinary power and liberation.

Where *Returns* brings its hero rudely back down to earth, though, is in its continuing uncertainty over how Superman will actually relate in gameplay to his adopted city. With the film bearing a minimum of action scenes, the DC rogues' gallery has been thoroughly plundered for set-piece encounters to fill out content, but the glue between them – the life of the city – is notably absent. Some aspects simply haven't been implemented, such as the ability of Metropolis' citizens to do anything other than mill awkwardly like unprepared extras, but others are more troubling. Combat with roaming minions, for instance, is unfocused, typified by a combo counter that seems included for no real reason other than the supposition that combat requires a combo counter.

In fact, the entire open world seems to be waiting for a reason to be an open world, other than it being de rigeur for superhero titles. With Superman's eternal boy scout character precluding *GTA*'s delights of poking the world with a stick and watching the spiralling unpredictability of its reaction, it's crucial *Returns* provides a city dynamic enough to care for instead – for downtime to be patronly rather than awkward. There's still time for game and world to reconcile, and given that the game which would have been released day-and-date with the movie has obviously been stripped back and built over, it seems the team has the desire to do it.

One developer jokes that, given the calibre of Superman games to date, they're at least guaranteed not to make the worst one: the larger issue – not just for EA, or film conversions, or superhero games, but for Superman – is by how wide a margin they can make the best.

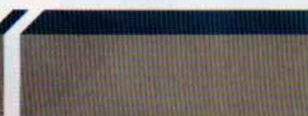




Recurring villain Metallo grows in stature until the final battle with a city-dwarfing incarnation, which has proved Tiburon's most oft-shown section of the game



The Metallo boss fight shows the most encouraging gameplay suggestions yet, not in the actual combat – which is a fairly standard pattern recognise-and-repeat affair – but in the choice between facing him down or breaking off to chase the missiles he sends into the city



FORMAT: **360, DS, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (EA TIBURON)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**



Bizarro world

In response to many E3 attendees' desire to inflict Superman's powers on Metropolis rather than protect it, a side-game will task Superman's imperfect clone, Bizarro, with laying waste to the city. A fitting outlet for the havok that playing as Superman ideally cannot allow, there's a question over whether its easily-implemented mindless violence might yet overshadow Tiburon's work on finding rewarding gameplay in altruism.



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN) Q4 (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E161**

Contact

A closer look reveals method to Grasshopper's manufactured madness



Changing costumes (above) changes your stats, and donning a chef's hat allows you to cook with ingredients you harvest on your adventures. More advanced recipes reduce how much meals fill up your stomach (below)



At first glance, *Contact* seems to take place in two different worlds: the pixelled sci-fi of the top screen, and the lavish fantasy of the bottom. In fact, it's more a case that *Contact* takes place in two different perceptions of reality: above is the domain of the space-faring professor you're trying to help, below the playground of the young hero you control. This is what happens when you ask Grasshopper Manufacture, currently most famous for the fabulously warped *Killer 7*, to make a traditional RPG.

The core of *Contact* is pure convention, and as you play you can almost hear Grasshopper Manufacture chafing at the restrictions that implies. As a consequence, the team has given a classical set-up – visit different locations to retrieve magic crystals – an elaborate existential twist, as the professor who needs the crystals back talks directly to the player about how well the avatar they're controlling is doing. Levelling up, rather than being dependent on hoary old exp, comes automatically through use – the more you run, the faster you get; the more you get hit, the tougher you become. Potions and cookies may heal you, but Grasshopper gives you an inside view of your own stomach: each takes a certain time to digest, and you'll need to plan your top-ups strategically or your health will run out just as your gut boils over.





The contrast between art styles is clearest when comparing the interiors you find on your travels with that of the professor's HQ. The odd effect is to make the his plight – a sci-fi scientist in peril – seem more real

Some attempts at revolution are less successful – the organic denseness of the worlds you explore in the bottom screen can be as frustrating as it is refreshing, since it's not always clear which routes are passable and which aren't. And, although their appearance is intricate, their actual design is rather bland – there's not much in the way c puzzles, and the 'rule of lefts' will see you through most dungeons. Nor is exploration enlivened by the enemies you meet along th way. Although there are special skills to learn, and these can be swapped on the fly as can weapons – combat doesn't add up to much more than standing in front of an enemy and hoping you can chip his points off before he chips off yours.

But there's a silver lining: the old RPG tropes endure because they work, and as a consequence *Contact* works very nicely, too There's a soothing satisfaction to be had from gradually conquering areas, and a sens of real curiosity as you set off for a new island for the first time. The story manages a genuine sense of uncertainty, and, as a consequence, a genuine sense of tension, and the Grasshopper hallmarks of humour and flair survive the translation intact. The D is still oddly short of conventional RPGs – a genre you'd expect to flourish – which mean that *Contact*'s traditionalism is all the more welcome.



The naturalistic portrayal of the outside world – down to the beautifully drawn cows which can be slaughtered for their beef – makes *Contact* one of the most atmospheric RPGs on any system, let alone one with the limited power of the DS



A dog is for life

Your hero uses the professor's lab as a base, with his detailed sprite making a strong contrast to the pixellated presentation. There he can also find Nyan Nyan, the professor's space-dog, and when you save you're given the chance to play with him. Take the time to give him a tickle and a meal, and you will be rewarded with an attack which summons him to damage all enemies on screen. The more he likes you, the greater the damage, so it's worth making the effort – not least because it turns a dull chore into a micro-Tamagotchi treat.





FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUG (US), SEPT (UK/JAPAN)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E156, E163, E164**

Dead Rising

Capcom declares open season on its armies of plodding fodder, with a field day of the dead

From a chilling title screen that's worthy of Romero's own visions for (or rather of) the dead, it's on to a short helicopter ride through the town of Willamette to watch the traditional zombie-disaster carnage begin to take brutal hold of its population. It's a brief chance to get acquainted with the camera of photojournalist and lead character Frank West, as well as *Dead Rising*'s promise of ridiculous body counts, before being dropped onto the helipad of the town's Parkview Mall. And that, then, is where *Dead Rising*'s fabled freedom begins.

The breadcrumbs of the game's narrative are laid in front of Frank, but there's little to stop him indulging in an obligatory rampage, delving into *Dead Rising*'s sensational weapon set of picked-up props and the crush of reanimated bodies that swarm virtually every area bar the designated safehouse. Frank is fed objectives in the form of Scoop events, which are typically one of three things – a plot-pertinent quest, a survivor located somewhere throughout the mall, or one of a number of Psychopaths. The latter are insane humans on a rampage, and make up a series of skilfully rendered and often terrifying maniacs that form the game's mini-boss encounters.

That obligatory rampage underscores what's been pretty much expected all along – a game with a fantastic eye for rip-roaring violence and riotous slapstick. Smashed heads spill fountains of blood, while the dull, stupid plop of zombies tumbling down sets of stairs or falling from higher platforms is far more amusing than it should be. Running a parasol through a crowd produces a series of galloping thuds, and discovering a broadsword results in some of the most irresistible slicing and dicing around – from the perspective of free-roaming play, it's as much a butcher's playground as an infested shopping centre, and one where both the toys and playmates just keep coming.

The baseball bat is an effective club, but holding the attack button makes Frank assume a batter's stance, ready to pitch a home run on a head and earn a small points bonus. A kicked football pings between bodies, potentially earning a combo kill. Plunging a showerhead into a skull will cause it to gush blood from its spout – a perfect photo op, or just another well-realised gag to add to the pile.

It's swiftly apparent that there are issues, too – such as the poorly managed inventory system – but *Dead Rising* has a strong enough overarching vision, and it's a progressive one as opposed to a lavish reiteration of established ideas, to hold it in promising stead.





Guiding people back to the safehouse is a more profitable method for reaping experience points compared to zombie culling. New skills to be earned include crowd surfing and a number of clinch escapes



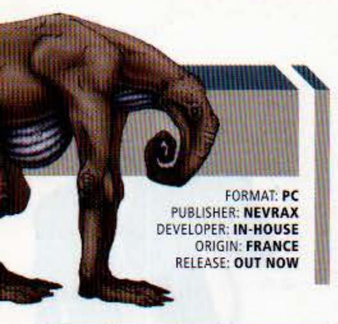
Below: Within each zombie lurks a parasite, and within each 'herd' of undead is a queen parasite. This can become a life-saving smart bomb, since squashing a queen causes all nearby enemies to lose their heads





Flash cordon

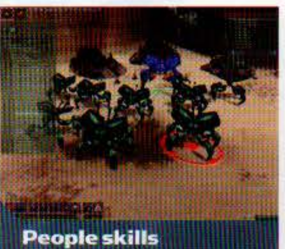
The game's photography aspect is used to buffer the player's experience points, which cover upgrades and skill expansions, which is hardly interesting. But, as with the rest of *Dead Rising*, there's some entertaining and finely-realised detail at work behind it all. Each photograph is attributed a genre – horror, brutality, comedy/outtake, drama and even erotica – with circles of different size indicating the value of every element in each shot. A special book can be picked up which will highlight the status of all photo opportunities in the vicinity, bringing to light just how much effort has gone into this aspect.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NEVRAX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

Ryzom Ring

Ryzom's first expansion aims to make pioneers out of players



People skills

NPCs and monsters can be easily grouped together to act as a single unit. Paths, indicated by arrowed lines, can be laid down for them to follow, and it's even possible to map out certain zones in which they can wander randomly. The choices of movement speed, from walking to running, and hands-on control of AI behaviour dictating how they react to the other objects they encounter, hint at the huge range of options available when creating scenarios.



With its 15-year plan and evolving world, *The Saga Of Ryzom* has always sought to distance itself from the *WarCraft*-scarred battlefield of other MMOGs. Despite an underwhelming beta and a struggle for subscribers, Nevrax's title has a cluster of followers and continues to make intriguing choices – such as *Ryzom Ring*. The game's first expansion, available for free to subscribers, is also the genre's first open-content editor, allowing players to create and manage online scenarios.

It's a bold move. In handing players the keys to the kingdom, there's always the chance that they'll choose to burn the place down. Balancing user freedom while maintaining the integrity of the established world has been a core concern for the development team, and a quick preview suggests that the balance is working. *Ryzom Ring* does not support terrain creation; instead, players choose from a varied set of available maps. In these spaces they can then place objects (buildings, NPCs, monsters and even flora and fauna), set event triggers and create missions. All elements are selected from a series of menus, and dialogue can be written and assigned to NPCs with a few clicks.

Despite the potential for bewilderment, the tools currently seem very accessible: the drag-and-drop system offers great immediacy, and is simple enough to get people playing around in seconds. Yet the depth on offer is surprising – almost every aspect can be tweaked in some way, and there's scope for creating large multi-act scenarios spread over a number of different maps. Tellingly, Nevrax aims to use the *Ring* itself when creating future content.

The developers suggest that a fairly solid scenario should take a day to make, and then another to test. They can then be made available as instanced areas online. While Nevrax will presumably have its work cut out monitoring this system and installing any kind of quality control, *Ryzom Ring* is shaping up to be an extremely accessible tool. It's also provided Nevrax with something that no one else in the MMOG world has, even if a content editor seems to be an unlikely way of tempting entirely new players into the market.

Harder to judge, however, is the effect that such a powerful toolset will have on the MMOG community. Seeing quests reduced to their most basic components – take object A to NPC to trigger dialogue and receive object B – is dangerously revealing of the prosaic machinery behind the game's lavish curtain. But it also suggests that *Ryzom Ring* could serve as more than just a step towards user-created online entertainment: it may prove to be a fascinating and incisive critique of the genre itself.



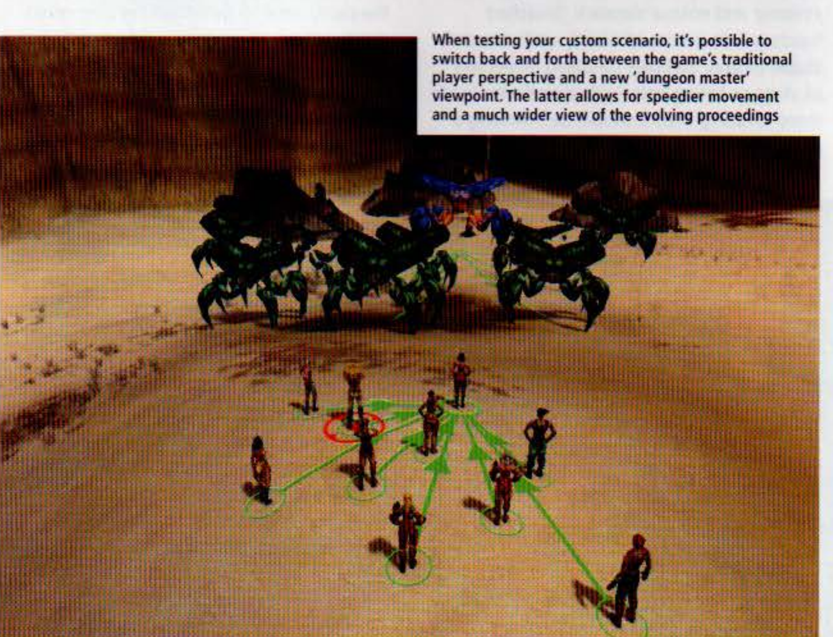
The appearance of NPCs can be adjusted via a pop-up window, and the range of options is huge without being overwhelming. Aside from changes to skin and height, practically any area of the face or body can be altered

Using the drag-and-drop interface and a series of menus, players can switch from creating their scenarios to testing them almost instantaneously. Within a matter of minutes, it's possible to have a small village laid out





The drag-and-drop system means that it's immediately clear how the scenario is shaping up. From the moment objects are in position, leaves shift in the wind, birds screech and frogs hop back and forth



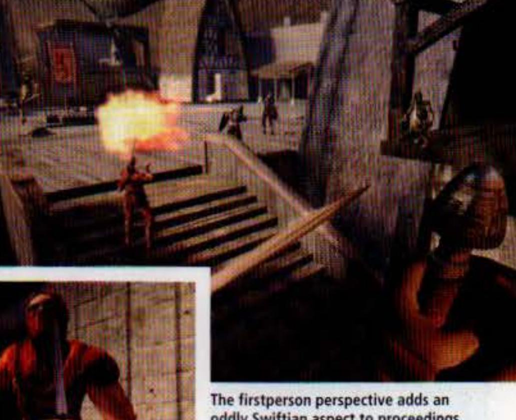
When testing your custom scenario, it's possible to switch back and forth between the game's traditional player perspective and a new 'dungeon master' viewpoint. The latter allows for speedier movement and a much wider view of the evolving proceedings

Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic

Arkane and Kuju bring the look and learn approach to sword and sorcery

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **ARKANE STUDIOS/KUJU SURREY**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE/UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E161, E164**





The firstperson perspective adds an oddly Swiftian aspect to proceedings, given the massive nature of many of the structures (and monsters) on display. The environments are richly detailed rather than elaborately over-inventive

If two developers operating on separate sides of the Channel might seem like a recipe for a split personality, *Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic* seems remarkably clear-headed. While Lyon-based Arkane Studios handles the singleplayer campaign, Kuju Surrey has been working on the multiplayer game. Both teams have retained the same focus: making strategy a central part of the action.

This intention is apparent in a quick glimpse of the singleplayer game. A sleeping township: smoky midnight clouds fill the sky, and the amber windows of a church glow ominously in the distance. Starting above a moss-covered alleyway, the aim is to take out a courtyard of enemies. Wading straight in and firing spells in every direction results in quick defeat. Success requires a thoughtful approach: sneaky appraisal of the situation from a higher vantage point, a few swift arrows, and only then descending to mop up the stragglers. Attention to the surroundings is crucial, whether it's shooting platforms out from under enemies or burning pillars to bring the roof down. While certain elements veer towards the scripted, there's no denying the appeal of treating each encounter as a puzzle set by the developer.

The *Battlefield*-influenced multiplayer game has the same emphasis delivered in a different manner. Character classes, absent from singleplayer, are implemented with the express purpose of forcing teams to think about the strategic use of individual players. There are five classes: priestesses can heal (with a wide attack aimed at players unfamiliar with FPSes), mages and archers are powerful at long range but suffer up close, as do assassins, who excel at the sneak kill. Warriors obliterate all close combat encounters except when pitched against other warriors – a potentially fascinating stalemate which requires the exploitation of other players' mistakes. The classes interlock well, ensuring that success will rely as much on getting the team balanced as making sure the arrows fly straight.

Crusade is the multiplayer's main focus. Essentially a mini campaign, spread across five maps, victory means moving forward to the next map; defeat means falling back. The maps are as detailed and appealing as the singleplayer environments, and the battles have a hectic tension, built on an ebb-and-flow of seeking out positions before engaging the enemy. Along with deathmatches, Crusade offers plenty of opportunities to show off the game's triumphantly solid achievements in the field of firstperson close combat.

With its release looming, *Dark Messiah* continues to show a remarkable coherency – paying credit to its separate developers. While the sandbox elements may prove to be too tightly engineered to allow genuine improvisation, the game is still shaping up to be an alluring and atmospheric rollercoaster, regardless of the number of players involved.

While the setting is often pure *Thief* (unsurprising, given the involvement of Randy Smith), the gameplay brings to mind memories of that series' twin, *Deus Ex*, with environmental gimmicks making for a relatively controlled adventure





Multiplayer supports 32 players over five maps, divided into teams of humans or the undead. They gain experience and level up throughout, taking weapons and skills across to the next skirmish



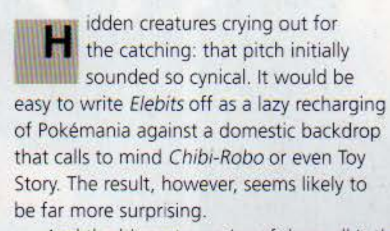
Light and Dark Messiah

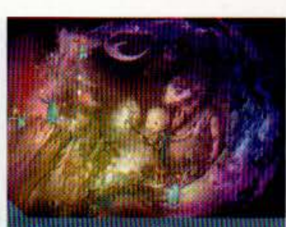
Ubisoft's title remains an unrepentantly pretty game, paying a painterly level of attention to the interaction of light and shadow. The outside world is bleached by a glaring sun, and inside the atmosphere is coldly oppressive – both creating a sense of vulnerability. Form follows function throughout, however: the strongly evoked chiaroscuro effect forces the player into an awareness of their location that is crucial for springing many of the designers' traps.

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Elebits

Konami goes domestic, asking about what's really inside your microwave





Catch 'em all?

Central to the appeal of the game are the titular Elebits themselves: smooth featured, shiny and with oddly implacable stares, the creatures exude a crafty charm. More than 50 designers were involved with their development inside Konami, and thousands of character sketches were drawn up before the market research to determine which ones were the most suitable for global domination was completed. It's surprising, then, that the results of this relentless focus grouping should retain such a strong sense of originality.

Hidden creatures crying out for the catching: that pitch initially sounded so cynical. It would be easy to write *Elebits* off as a lazy recharging of Pokémania against a domestic backdrop that calls to mind *Chibi-Robo* or even Toy Story. The result, however, seems likely to be far more surprising.

And the biggest surprise of them all is the slow-dawning realisation that *Elebits* is, in essence, an FPS – albeit an FPS reduced to first principles and then rebuilt with an entirely different focus. As Japanese audiences spend considerably less time viewing their virtual worlds down the barrel of a gun than those in the west, *Elebits* unites with *Killer 7* in imagining what the genre might look like divested of a near-decade's worth of baggage. Gone are the rust-ridden corridors and gothic details. Gone are the blood splatters and headshots. Instead we have kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms – bright, shiny spaces where your prey lurks inside kettles, or underneath the sink. And you're not killing it anymore, of course, just collecting it.

More *Duck Hunt* than *Doom*, *Elebits* sends you off in search of the eponymous creatures – tiny, electrical beings that must be collected in order to fill up the in-game watt gauge. Stages play out in three minute bursts: the Elebits are fast-moving, and object manipulation – ranging from peeking under bowls to more complex physics-based puzzles – seems likely to play as large a part in their capture as a steady trigger finger.



The game engine has been designed entirely from the ground up, and producer Shingo Mukaitogne, (the man behind titles such as *Beatmania II DX* and *Pop'n Music*) admits that it's been made with plans for re-use in mind. As befits a first-wave title for a new and ambitious platform, the game currently feels over-stuffed with elements – the detailed domestic spaces in which the Elebits lurk are intensely busy places at present. Whether the development team can create an environment of physics-based experimentation rather than a clutter of cheap gimmickry will be crucial to the success of the finished product. Either way, it seems inevitable that the game will have to be slimmed down somewhat from its current state.

Konami has yet to reveal how far from domestic interiors and into the wilds of suburbia the game will tread. Like *Chibi-Robo*, the pleasure of the graphical style lies in its colourful simplification and restyling of the real world

This issue aside, *Elebits* is on course to deliver a confident and colourful experience. The initial concept is delightful, and hunting down and corralling the elusive creatures is an instantly appealing prospect. Character and location design are both simple and attractive. Provided there's enough variation to keep the setting fresh without diluting the immediacy of the hunt, Konami's title could prove an unmissable part of the early Wii line up. While it's unlikely to make Japan fall in love with the firstperson perspective all by itself, it provides a welcome glimpse of where the genre could have gone if it hadn't been so obsessed with *Doom* and gloom.

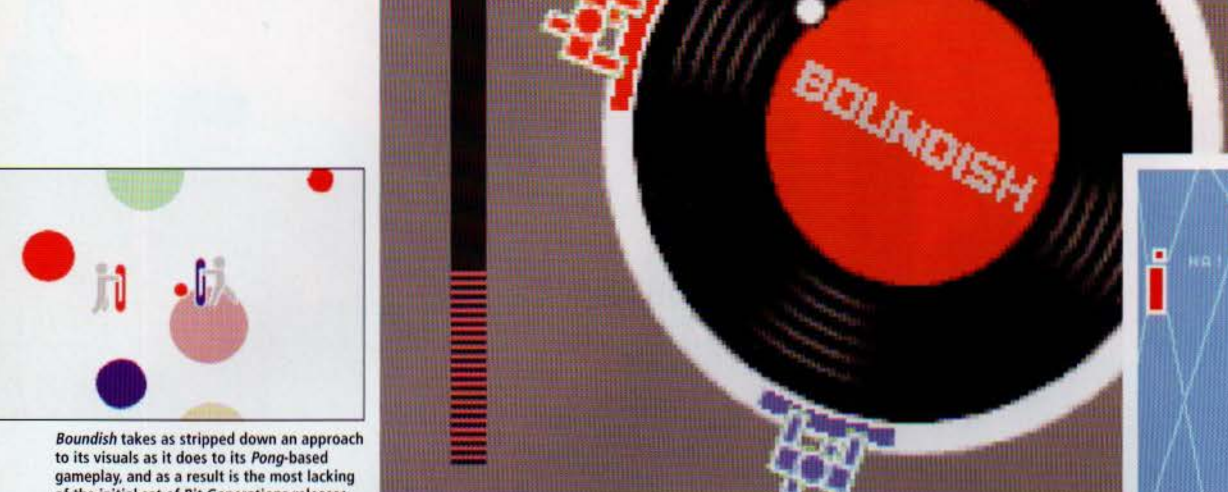
Below: The electrical wand can be used to move objects around, revealing Elebits sneaking around behind them. Capturing them all safely can see the game pitch between strategy and puzzle-based gameplay

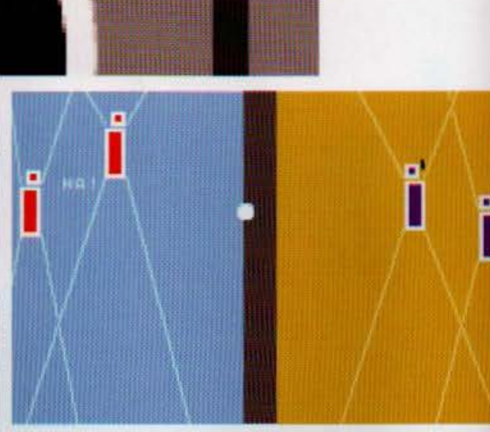


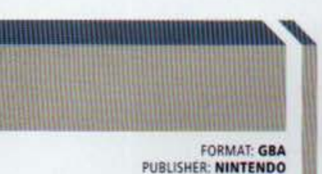




While it's no *Half-Life 2*, most objects in the *Elebits* universe have their own physics models. Experimenting with the properties of objects – and just throwing them around – seems likely to form a large part of the game's early appeal







Boundish takes as stripped down an approach to its visuals as it does to its *Pong*-based gameplay, and as a result is the most lacking of the initial set of Bit Generations releases

FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SKIP**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E165**

Bit Generations

On your GBA or in your DS's cart slot, Skip's collection shows that it's cool to be small

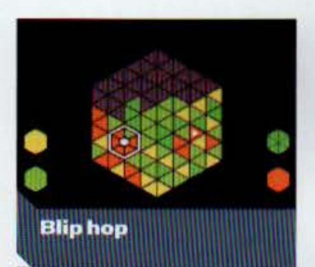
Minimalism is a fickle property, requiring a steady and confident touch to strike the right, fine balance between deliberate economy and unintentional deficiency. Nintendo's first lineup in its Bit Generations series plays a risky game with it in evoking its sense of techno-chic, opting for stark fields of flat colour and pixel-thin elements in contrast to, say, Q Entertainment's own extravagantly flashy forays into music and puzzle gaming style.

Of the three entries in the first series, *Dotstream* is easily the most feature-rich and traditionally rewarding. Though presented under the guise of a racer, with unlockable five-course GPs, there's no acceleration and no bounding out of the gates, just a cerebral exercise in shining the straightest gliding line of light through the course's vector environments, with all superfluous movement decelerating your dot and a sparse stable of power-ups to alter it. It's also the most deceptively challenging of the bunch, with its first GP lulling you into a false sense of mastery before driving you headlong into far more challenging territory littered with path-altering obstacles.

Surprisingly *Dialhex*, which initially appeared to be among the most conventional in its design, may see its well-judged modesty rewarded with the most staying power of the initial series. Striking a harmonious chord between its objective simplicity – turning falling triangles to create perfect like-coloured hexagons – and progressively building difficulty, it manages to create a puzzle game both instantly familiar and refreshingly inventive, with its non-traditional shape demanding new ways of thinking to approach common problems in precisely the same way as *Lumines* before it. It's smart and endlessly addictive stuff, with its interface entirely clear of unnecessary distractions allowing you to completely lose yourself in its field.

It's *Boundish* that finds itself too much on the wrong side of the minimalist bent, but not for lack of trying. Understanding that *Pong* is, in a sense, the essential game, it bravely, and perhaps misguidedly, attempts to update the formula across four of its five minigames, diluting *Pong*'s purity with free-movement, double paddles, bumpers and a stage set upon the surface of a 12-inch single. Adding a second player to the mix, as usual, enhances the experience, but the tedium of its singleplayer endeavour overshadows all four. The fifth, a basic back and forth juggling game, is a Game & Watch throwback – and wouldn't be out of place as a 'Juggle Forever' *Wario Ware* unlockable, but as the strongest selling point of a collection five games large, it can't save the entire package from an overwhelming sense of lacking.

The second series of Generations promises even more audacious design than the games of its first, but already it seems Nintendo's grand experiment in capturing boutique credibility has its bits largely in all the right places.

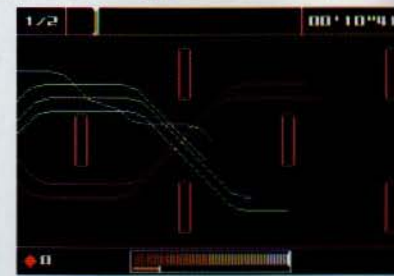


Blip hop

Nintendo's first commercial showing of its lineup was accompanied by a pair of headphones at every station for a reason: the sound of the Bit Generations is as much a defining element as any of its visuals or individual game design. *Dotstream*'s races are marked by a sound set that accompanies its digital-hardcore Game Boy score, with every boost, crash and slow-down adding musical flourishes. *Dialhex*'s advancing 'stages' are themselves accompanied by perhaps the smoothest downtempo electronic and jazzy loops to ever emerge from the GBA, starting slow and then blossoming and unfolding as more hexagons are removed. And *Boundish*'s soundtrack is appropriately underscored with a steady blip that mirrors the ball-and-paddle match.



Dotstream is full of a surprising range of subtleties for such pared-down presentation. Only one colour can occupy each line, so if you turn at the same time as a competitor, one of you will be knocked up or down: an 8bit translation of the argy-bargy of a full racing game



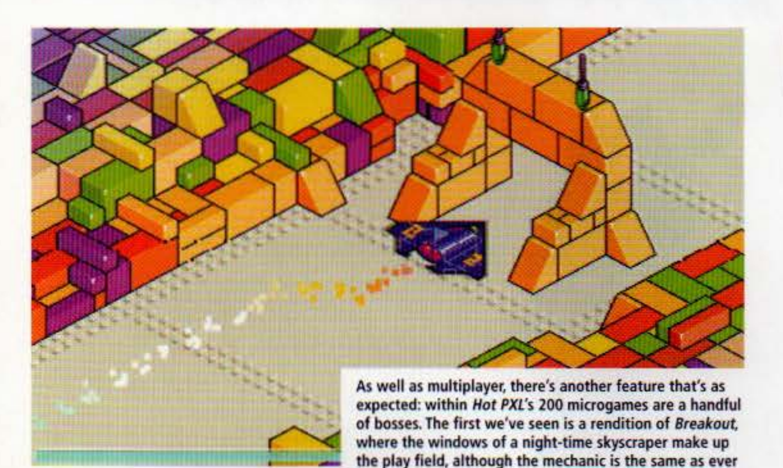


Dialhex is exhaustingly absorbing, shrinking your world to one hexagon of light. Its simple prettiness almost makes the game harder, since the playing field filling with colour doesn't trigger the same adrenelin-producing anxiety as a *Tetris* well filling up with awkward trash

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **ZSLIDE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **CHRISTMAS 2006**

Hot PXL

An unflattering lack of Wario Ware imitators gives zSlide's barefaced chic some room to breathe



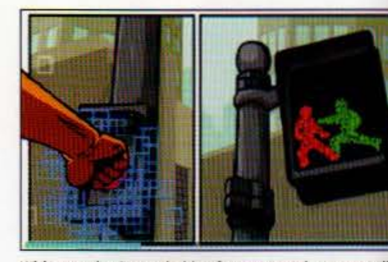
As well as multiplayer, there's another feature that's as expected: within *Hot PXL*'s 200 microgames are a handful of bosses. The first we've seen is a rendition of *Breakout*, where the windows of a night-time skyscraper make up the play field, although the mechanic is the same as ever





An unrelenting series of microgames introduced with a short phrase that explains the simplistic task before the player? And executed within a strict time limit? And using nothing more sophisticated than the D-pad and a face button? Perhaps there's no shame in being a *Wario Ware* clone, slightly because the word 'clone' is often disingenuous in its application, but mostly because, like *GTA*, it's a fertile enough idea to nourish a whole genre. However, unlike *GTA*, not many have tried to spin *Wario Ware*'s formula for a new end.

Taking its cues directly and heavily from street culture and 'digital lifestyle', *Hot PXL* is nonetheless capable of displaying visual variety despite the focus of its overall theme. And there are definitely glimpses of the anything-goes attitude of Nintendo's microgame marathon, switching continually between play styles and perspectives to suit its own particular whims. But thanks to the quality of the hardware's display compared to Nintendo's handhelds, its pixel art seems instantly less cute, and a more pronounced, self-conscious statement of style.



With many having a phobia of street-centric games, will this have to tread carefully? Not really – it has a classy confidence about its looks that'll help dispel any cynicis

Of the handful of games offered in the preview code, some manage to be both instinctive and interesting, while some are obtuse to the point they need to be failed in order to unravel them. Some provide efficient, natural movement, while others feel less tactile. There's as much variation in the quality as in the play styles, it seems. UMD access will also be something to watch if, in a similar manner to *Wario Ware*, *Hot PXL* intends to speed up the pace of play as more and more games are completed in succession.

Need For Speed Carbon

A showing of EA's next-generation-led street racer indicates the dangers of driving in the dark

FORMAT: **360, DS, GBA, GC, PC, PSP, PS2, PS3, Wii, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2006**

The latest *Need For Speed*'s enigmatic moniker chiefly refers to Carbon Canyon, a precarious stretch of California highway, but also to the layer of the stuff street racers leave seared over barriers and tarmac in their wake – and the more concentrated deposits wrecked cars leave at the ravine's base. As a side-effect, it also seems to have coated the game's visuals, the perpetual night currently more dingy than next-gen electric.

That might not be so vexing if EA's own test renders for *NFS* hadn't been painted in autumnal glow, or if the *NFS: Hot Pursuit* arcade machine outside *Carbon*'s demo room wasn't a low-res, high-saturation reminder of the series' pre-urban looks. But car culture's priorities have shifted from open roads to closed streets, from manufacturer chic to modified excess, and in customisation options, *Carbon* is undeniably striking – introducing an automotive equivalent to EA



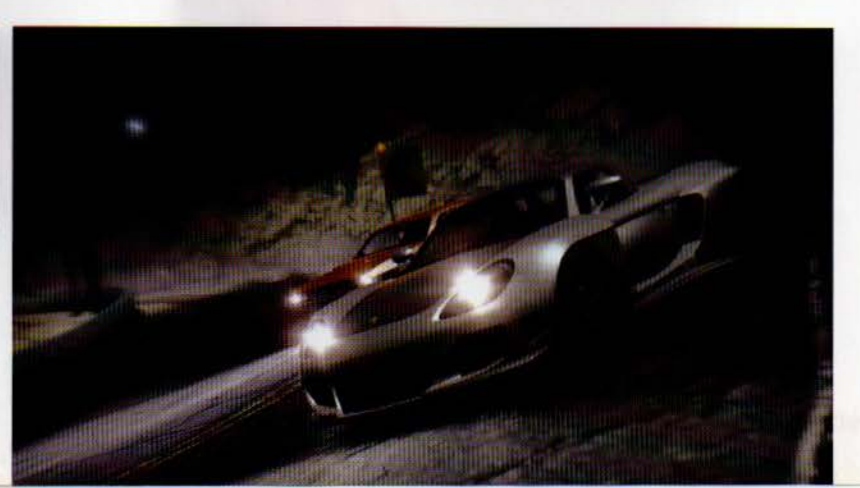
Despite leading on next-gen machines, rather than a port-up as with last year's *Most Wanted*, *Carbon* is oddly muted where we expected EA to take an overexposed leaf from Michael Mann – or perhaps Michael Bay

Sports' face-creation tools. The game's roster of lustrous car models can be tweaked and crimped in every area, to the extent that it's hard not to suck your breath between your teeth when a collision shears paint from bodywork.

A more expensive fate awaits in the canyon itself, with boss duels finally leaving the city for a blink-and-you're-over rush through catseye-studded darkness. Along with expanded car-RPG functionality for assembling a racing crew – the frantic radio chatter doing much to enliven the street races as some sort of four-wheel dogfight – there's more to *Carbon* than a retread. Without getting some attention to its looks (which, it's promised, will be forthcoming), though, it's easy to read it as exactly that.



Canyon duels open with a game of follow-the-leader, requiring you to keep as close behind your opponent as possible as they wilfully disobey Carbon Canyon's speed limit; a follow-up section lets you take the lead



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER**

Bleach Wii

Famous names come to Nintendo's Wii – but how do you play it safe on a machine that insists on enforcing innovation?





Shots like this suggest that the Remote is crucial to the game. So far, just four characters have been announced



Sega is promising that some of the scenery is destructible, including parts of the ground. Bright swordplay effects nicely offset the more muted cel-shaded crosshatching of the character models and the hazy scenery

Sega's support for Nintendo's Wii continues to grow, with the popular anime licence Bleach taking its place alongside Sonic and AiAi. Treasure's recent title, *Bleach DS: Souten Ni Kakeru Unmei*, may have set the bar dauntingly high, but Sega's own reputation in the 3D fighting field is hardly insignificant.

And while Treasure used the licence to provide an unofficial sequel to *Yu Yu Hakusho: Makyo Toitsusen*, Sega's game currently resounds with aesthetic echoes of the original *Virtua Fighter*. The sky is terribly blue, landscapes seem sparse and barren, and those gently cel-shaded characters still stand out sharply against distant backdrops.

The empty spaces raise a crucial question: what controller trickery is Sega planning to fill such a bare stage? The predominance of swords suggests the Remote is likely to play a central role, but there has yet to be any solid announcement on the subject.

As a 3D fighter, with all the conventions that dictates, Sega's title shows the long-anticipated difficulties in bringing existing game styles to the Wii. Every choice is a gamble, whether Sega opts for a new contro system that may prove unwieldy, or to take the risk of taking no risk, and aim for norma pad-and-buttons input and the possibility of appearing conservative. But whether the game becomes a benchmark for how to incorporate old genres into a new control scheme, or offers proof that Nintendo's revolution can still support more traditional games, what hopefully won't be in question is Sega's tradition of satisfying, solidly presented entertainment.

Tingle RPG

Nintendo takes another gamble with niche IP, as a Zelda bit-player sets off on a quest for riches

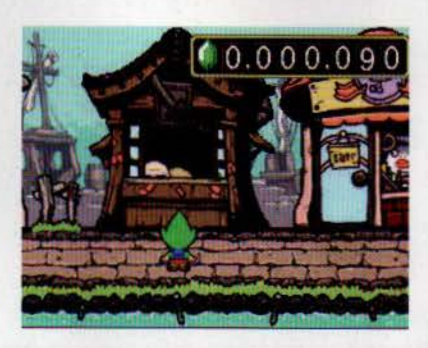
FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2006**





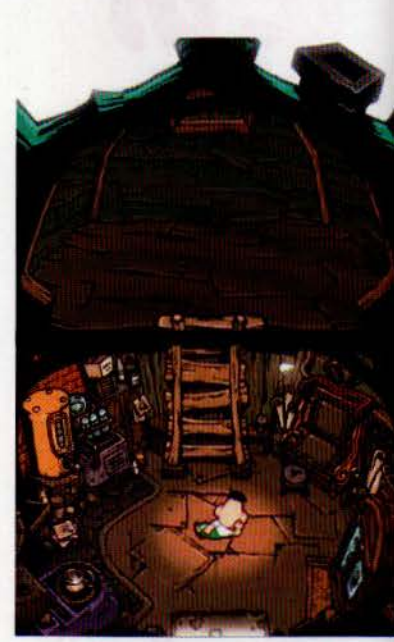
Forever the treasure hunter, Tingle's quest revolves around collecting Rupees as a donation to a spirit that lives in a well. It may prove unintentionally apt that the game places such a strong focus on throwing money into a deep hole

First impressions of the latest off-shoot from *Zelda* can be summed up in two words: Why Tingle? While it's true that Nintendo has a knack for repositioning its more wayward characters, Wario's success doesn't bolster Tingle's chances so much as loom ominously over them. Putting aside the wisdom of building a game around a character forever associated with the least enjoyable portions of *The Wind Waker*, one question stands out: does Nintendo's fairy-in-waiting have a game behind him that can match Wario's wares?

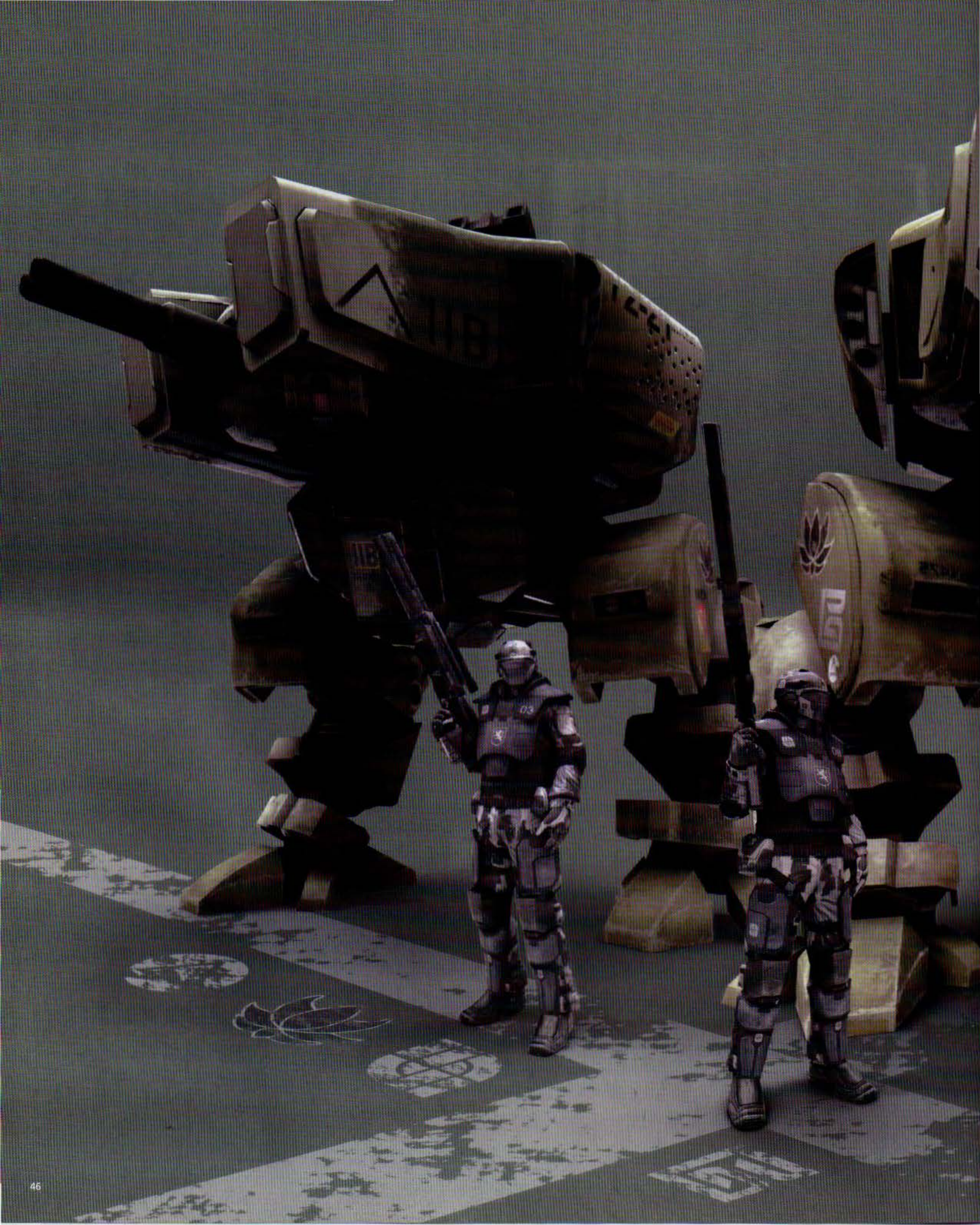


The answer is not yet obvious. While screenshots have hinted at a baffling degree of colour and variety, this is no collection of minigames – it's a full RPG, although those hoping for a title with the depth of *Dragon Quest*, or even *Mario And Luigi: Partners In Time*, will most certainly be disappointed. Anyone familiar with *Majora's Mask* or *The Wind Waker* will probably not be surprised that Tingle's quest revolves around the gathering of Rupees. Concrete details are still scarce, but it seems that the collectable gems will play a crucial role in the game itself, settling checkpoint fees and even purchasing specific actions.

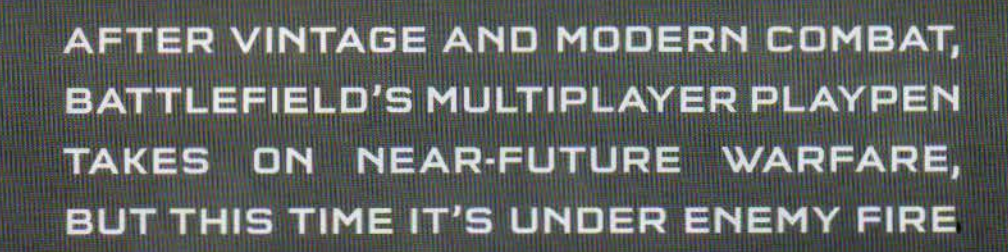
While Rupee management may add a fair degree of strategy to proceedings, it remains to be seen whether the game can bear up under the challenges inherent in its own IP. If *Zelda* has always shown a near-eugenic zeal for gradual refinement, Tingle stands out as something of a bizarre anomaly. Whether he proves to be an evolutionary dead-end is not yet clear, but his current adventure seems likely to repel as many players as it attracts.



The background art is typically rich and varied, with just a hint of *Wario Ware's* flattened-colour aesthetic. Character design appears to be slightly more risqué than might otherwise be expected from Nintendo



POST MODERN



A science-fiction setting may seem like a sudden departure for Digital Illusions (aka DICE), the Swedish developer that over the last six years has so successfully exploited the real-world warfare of the previous 60 to create *Battlefield*, its trailblazing online mass combat franchise. In fact, *Battlefield 2142* is a perfectly logical progression for a series which has steadfastly followed the march of time, from *1942* through *Vietnam* to the contemporary setting of *Battlefield 2* and its console spin-off, *Modern Combat*; the future was the only place left for it to go. Despite taking a century-and-a-half-long stride, signs are that it hasn't deviated from its path one bit, presenting a credible, only very mildly fantastical conflict between earthbound powers (an American-allied EU versus a Russian-led Pan-Asian Coalition). But that path is, for the first time, going to cross with a rival's: id and Splash Damage's *Quake Wars*.



Despite what DICE claims is a faster pace than *Battlefield 2*, the team has tried to engineer longer survival times, especially with the improvements to situational awareness. Our playtest bore this out, although the map was far from full

"IN BATTLEFIELD GAMES AS A WHOLE IT IS THE TRUE SANDBOX EXPERIENCE. YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT AT ANY POINT"

Quake Wars is a formidable threat, even to a name as established as *Battlefield*. Though neither game is entirely new in format or technology – Doom 3-engined *Quake Wars* springing from *Wolfenstein* mod *Enemy Territory*, *2142* being a thematic and design overhaul of *Battlefield 2* – the *Quake* game at present looks fresh, hungry for innovation, rich in its source material. Its network code is said to be capable of handling more than 100 players at once, while *2142* continues with a 64-player cap (maybe even fewer in its signature new mode, Titan). What's more, given id's history and Splash Damage's clan pedigree, *Quake Wars* has impeccable community-relationship credentials already, an area in which, despite its huge following, *Battlefield* has always had a difficult time.

"I have nothing bad to say about it," shrugs DICE's **Marcus Nilsson**, senior producer of *Battlefield 2142*. "I played it at E3 – naturally, it's a competitor to us, I've been following it closely. It was great. The clichéd answer is that it's always good to have competition, I don't necessarily see it that way." DICE refuses to be provoked into reacting to its belligerent new neighbour, though. Nilsson is clear that the worst thing they could do is betray *Battlefield*'s traditional strengths in a quest to reinvent the wheel. "I think there is a core difference – in *2142* and *Battlefield* games as a whole, it is the true sandbox experience. You can do whatever you want at any point, and we very clearly communicate that." He feels *Quake Wars* forces a focus on objectives and teamplay that, in *Battlefield*, is encouraged but always optional. "In the E3 demo [of *Quake*] if you had a team without spawning an engineer on the GDF side, you couldn't build a bridge, and if you don't build a bridge you don't get to th next step. In our Titan mode, you could have everyone running around with their pistols an they could take down the Titan regardless. You're not forced to do anything. That keeps us apart."

The new *Battlefield*'s setting furnishe players – as well as DICE's art team, previously somewhat starved of an opportunity to flex their creative muscles – with a host of attractive flourishes, from the hulking two-man Battle Walker mechs and hover-tanks, to active camouflage (though all weapons remai strictly projectile) and vehicle shield systems. There's also a very welcome 'networked battlefield' system allowing squad members to automatically share data on enemy positions and health through the HUD, the information getting more detailed as you rank up. But, say Nilsson, Titan mode is its star feature and chief reason for being. In it, each side has a large base ship hovering over one end of the map. The first phase of the battle involves capturing missile silos to lower the opposing Titan's shields; the second, an attempt to board it via gunship or by literally firing yourselves out of APC-mounted pod launchers; the third, a claustrophobic corridor battle inspired by the opening scene of Star Wars to trigger its self-destruct by activating four consoles in sequence. Squad leaders' ability to place spaw points will be key in this fiercely territorial phase, although the Titan can be pounded into submission from the ground if need be.

It's a dramatic set-up and very visually rewarding, especially the missile launches triggered by every successful base capture, but it is essentially a three-dimensional twist on a fairly traditional base-capture gametype, and the interior design of the Titans themselves does not seem inspired. That's a shame, because for Titan battles to assume a markedly

RANK OUTSIDERS

The game's deeper, broader ranking system might help with the insurmountable wall of difficulty that rears up in front of new players of competitive online games after a few months, once the core fanbase attains a certain level, but Nilsson is cautious. "In *Modern Combat* we tried to take measures against that, not necessarily so successful, with different servers and segmented servers. We are looking into ways of doing that for *2142* as well, of funnelling people into different skill levels. But we also need to care about [customer] satisfaction – when *Battlefield 2* was released it was really hard to get on a server... The end experience became really crap. We obviously need to make sure we have enough, and if you start to limit the number of servers people can play on because of segmentation – you can see it but you can't play on it – it's a problem as well."

The EU forces' battle technology has a chunky, hard-edged look, while the Pan-Asian Coalition's designs are more rounded and a little more futuristic. The game's visual style is understated to the point of perhaps being overly conventional, but this is in keeping with DICE's wish to portray a future that's credible and not too far-flung



Locations used in the game will run from snowbound Minsk through Europe to dusty North Africa. The background story sees the armed forces of US-backed Europe and the Pan-Asian Coalition squabbling over available land as the encroaching chill of a new ice age forces their populations to migrate south

The Pan-Asian battle walker is Nilsson's favourite: "It's just the meanest thing." Pilots control their ground weapons, and gunners their anti-air battery. Despite manoeuvring problems and weak spots, their entertainment value rules the field

Titans can be moved in the horizontal plane across the battlefield, but their weapons – downward-facing artillery turrets – are strictly defensive, and powerless against the air units used to board them

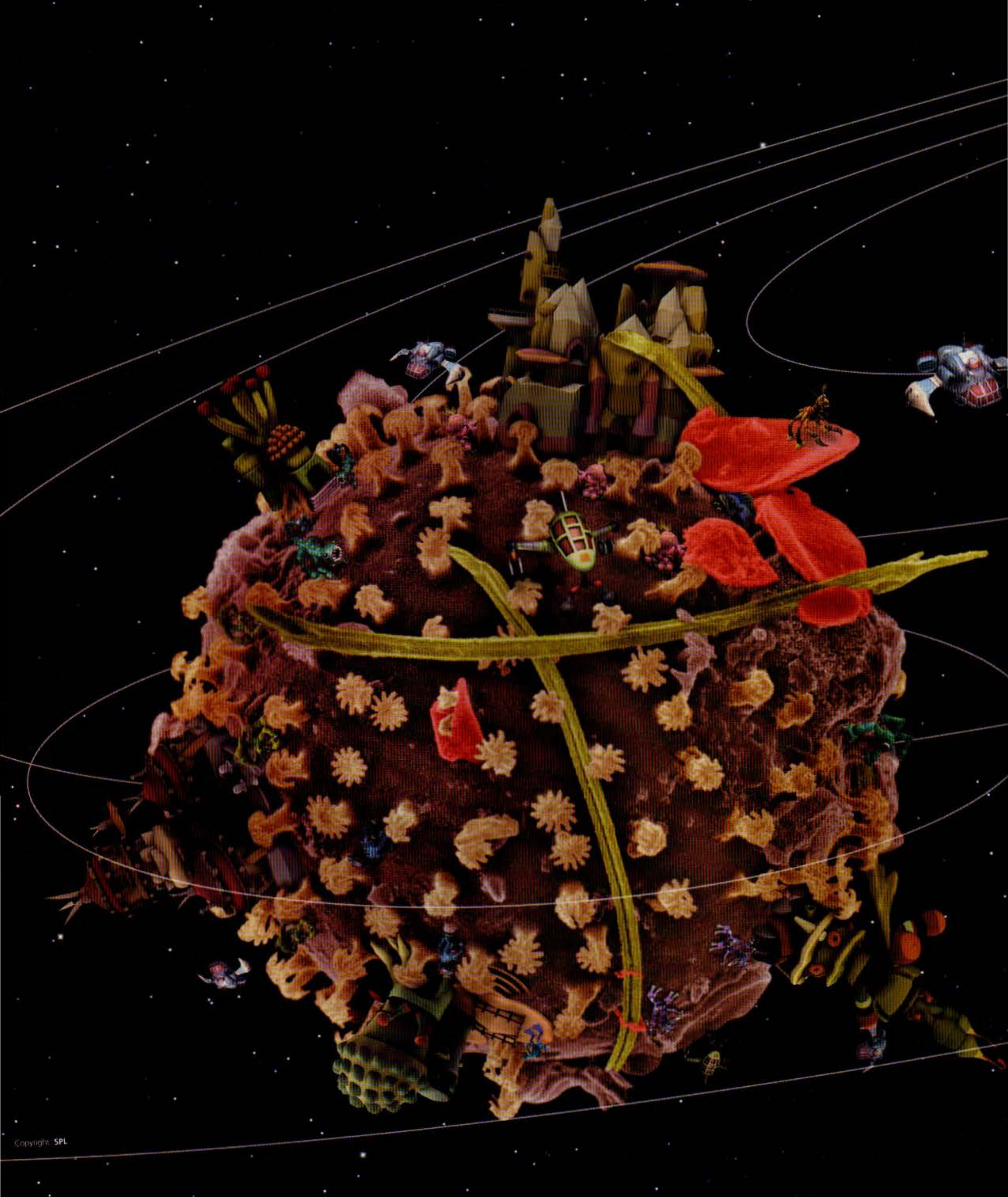
different tactical shape from regular Conquest matches, the action on the Titan will need to provide a strong lure to tear players away from the familiar action and mouth-watering selection of transport options on the ground. The new vehicles, though fictitious, have huge physical appeal, especially the commanding, ponderous mechs; and they seem better balanced than *Battlefield 2*'s, with less overwhelming air power.

After Titan mode, *2142*'s most significant step forward is made, to some extent, outside of the game itself. A new and much-expanded persistent system rewards consistent play with more than kudos (though there will be plenty of that on offer, with 43 ranks, a range of achievement badges and dog-tag collection for unique knife kills). The four template kits – adhering more or less to class archetypes of medic, sniper, support and engineer – can be improved, specialised or hybridised with a new unlockable skill or item every time you rank up. Unlockables will also incentivise squad play, with team players making faster progress up the skill trees, and temporary field upgrades will offer a chance to try before you buy. It's not an exclusive system, but only the very best players will be able to master all disciplines, so it should encourage diversity as well as loyalty to the game. Though Nilsson stresses it's no equivalent of RPG levelling, it is inspired by *World Of WarCraft*'s uncanny ability to drive its players: "I'm amazed how people are being sucked into that game. I like how it intrigues the gamer, and how it intrigues the community around it. Eighty per cent of the team plays *WOW* more or less full time when they leave work. If there's a game like that you would be stupid if you didn't look at it."

Improved community support has to be a part of that picture, he acknowledges – "We're not there right now, but the tasks we're doing are going to get us there" – and DICE is dedicating more staff to community management, as well as planning active promotion of the mod scene, and an open beta beginning in mid-August. It's promising a much less buggy game this time around too, although with *Battlefield 2*'s ineffective patching gradually eroding its reputation, that might not mean much. Regardless, Nilsson is confident that *2142*'s persistent rewards, alongside its freeform, non-prescriptive style, will help it maintain *Battlefield*'s position as the popular choice ahead of the "good, solid hardcore audience" he sees *Quake Wars* attracting. Our playtest leaves us unsure: *2142* is undoubtedly going to be a thoughtful variation on a near-classic game, but Titan mode is nowhere near radical enough to stop it from feeling rather stolid and conservative next to its rival's running battle with convention. Conservatism may be all *Battlefield*'s legions of fans really want, of course – and they may be right – but, by the time both sides reach this future battlefront, will those fans still be there?

Your kit and its configuration can be changed every time you spawn. Unlockables include less scope sway and faster run speed as well as new weapons and items such as remote drones. Left, senior producer Marcus Nilsson


TITLE: **BATTLEFIELD 2142**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**





THE SEED OF AN IDEA

FROM NEBULA TO MOLECULE, AND FROM WILL WRIGHT TO YOU, SPORE'S MASSIVE UNIVERSE IS FULL OF STARS

Will Wright's office is the way you expect it would be – covered top to toe with maps of the solar system, remote controlled toy robots, books and scribbled notes expanding even to the glass door onto his office patio. We're here in an attempt to wrap our minds around everything, by which we mean Everything. *Spore's* surprise debut at the 2005 Game Developer's Conference played to a standing-room-only crowd, who became the game's first disciples. Their hushed, disbelieving 'did you see it too?' sentiments and covert blurry mobile phone photos spread across the internet, but most were left unable to fully express in words the potential magnitude of what they'd just witnessed. Each subsequent demonstration has only added more to think about, more to see, more to digest.

The expansiveness and infinitesimally minute level of detail of the *Sims* that came before it now seem like a simple twinkle in *Spore's* (placeable and replaceable segmented, stalked or long-lashed) eyes. Nonetheless, Wright sits sideways in his office chair, effortlessly ready to field any question, knowing that there isn't any space in his Space he hasn't already travelled through.

For a game which 'sims' life, the universe and everything in between - every bit the culmination of decades' worth of those now bite-sized pieces - and which is modestly innovating on any number of fronts from its player-driven generative technologies to its 'massively singleplayer' pollinated content, ask Wright what he's most proud of and you might expect a litany of engineering achievements. But it's not: it's the people.

"The team," he answers, without even thinking, "It's a hand-picked team of people, where I was cherry picking the best in the company. Because of that, what seemed like an impossible design at the beginning started to seem probable, then likely and now positive, and at every turn the team has exceeded my expectations about what they could deliver both technologically and design-wise."

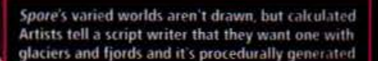


Proto culture

Like much of *Spore*'s slow evolution, the creature editor was the product of six months to a year's worth of constant prototyping and experimentation into various methods of creative construction. Referencing source material like Takeo Igarashi's Teddy (later used in the *Magic Pengel* series), the editor went through countless 2D and 3D revisions with less than stellar results.

"The original creature editor was more of a 3D drawing program, and if you were an artist you could sculpt whatever you wanted," recounts game designer **Chaim Gingold**, "but when testers would come in and draw, they'd be like 'ta-daa' and everyone else would be like '...what is that?'"

It wasn't until Gingold teamed with traditional artists, who described the body as a deformable bean, that the current schema of a malleable bean with an adjustable spine clicked both with experienced and new users, and offered a starting point for defining a character's body in terms of personality.


Spore's varied worlds aren't drawn, but calculated. Artists tell a script writer that they want one with glaciers and fjords and it's procedurally generated

An elevator ride down from Wright's office to the main studio illustrates that point as we find ourselves in the midst of an accidental, impromptu design meeting, with art director **Ocean Quigley** describing the look and feel of a new UFO component using nothing but a series of wild reverberating hand gestures and accompanying mouth sounds. Wright looks on, quietly generating the scene in his mind, and in the end, just as the first-floor bell dings, gives the idea his seal of approval. As the elevator quietly empties, we wonder if that's how easy it is to add new functionality? "With Ocean, yes," answers Wright.

Quigley's task on *Spore* might at first seem a daunting one – art directing an entire galaxy of a few million planets – and one which he admits is only possible by relentlessly iterating and prototyping a million little pieces of making this directly, it's the engineers that are making the systems, so you have to figure out what you need to do to make it so that a player or procedural system can make something like this" – Quigley picks up one of the 3D printed creature figurines that litter the desk – "quickly and easily. It's kind of freakish in that regard – usually, I'm telling the artists: 'Make it bluer,' but here you're telling the engineers: 'Can we get some way to seam these two things together procedurally,' or: 'We need to run an ambient occlusion pass on this so the shadows sync up.' So it's an odd job."

With so much left to the unpredictable hands of players, and the game's machinery driving every bit of its visual content, we ask Quigley – coming off titles like *SimCity 4* where designers had full control of the world down to things that you can build and things you can manipulate in your direction – creatures, or other civilisations.

"We don't for the most part author levels; rather we have made machines that make levels. When you come down to a planet, part of the challenge that we're dealing with is making those visually compelling, so you're not like 'oh,

"OH MY GOD, THE PLAYER DAMN WELL BETTER DIVERGE! OTHERWISE WE COULD HAVE JUST GIVEN THEM A LEVEL GAME"

problems individually. But add to that the game's inversion of the traditional studio balance, with an art team a third of the size of earlier *Sim* titles being driven by an engineering team already larger than *Sims 2*'s, and his particular role becomes even more unique.

"Normally I'm art directing artists, but this is a game where I'm spending all my time art directing engineers. It's not the artists who are the pixel – if he's confident that *Spore*'s structures are rigid enough to handle the near infinite possible permutations, or if he worries about players deviating from the norm.

"Well, the whole sandbox ideology for games is predicated on the player diverging, so if the player doesn't diverge we've wasted *so much work*" – he buries his face in his hands – "Oh my god, the player damn well better diverge. Otherwise we could have just given them a level game.

"There are edge cases, of course, where players might push themselves into corners where stuff behaves badly or unexpectedly, but I'm not worried about that. In fact, that's where we're figuring the majority of the long term replayability of the game is, if it's just" – he rockets his arm straight forward through the air with an accompanying *thhbpt* – "and you're done with the game, great. But we're hoping – if it's anything like *SimCity* or *The Sims* – that people do that for eight or ten hours and then wonder: 'Hmm, I wonder what would have happened if I'd done *that* at *that* point,' and will explore the branching and the state space of what the game provides, both in terms of another one.' You really want to see something where you feel like there's intelligence behind the aesthetic decisions, and of course, make them viable gameplay levels, so if you go to a planet the interaction isn't just: 'Oh, it's pretty... OK, I'm going.' That's something that's a bear of a problem and something that we're still chewing on and manipulating."

At the other end of the design spectrum, *Spore*'s engineers are busy at work on a similarly Herculean task: attempting to provide a standard set of meshed-up keyframed and algorithmic creature animations to cover the player's near-infinite range of creative freedom. In the group's bespoke animation program, appropriately titled SPASM, technology fellow and animation team lead **Chris Hecker** manipulates an intergalactic identity parade of creatures great and small, grabbing what would approximate one's hand and swinging it into a right-hook attack, with the full line-up attempting their own similar attacks in turn, utilising whatever appendages they have at their disposal.

Hecker explains that with the exponential impossibility of custom-fitting movement for


In what must certainly be a procedural animator's worst nature-film nightmare, one primary goal of the Creature stage is to seek out a willing mate, to the accompaniment of sultry soul slow-jams

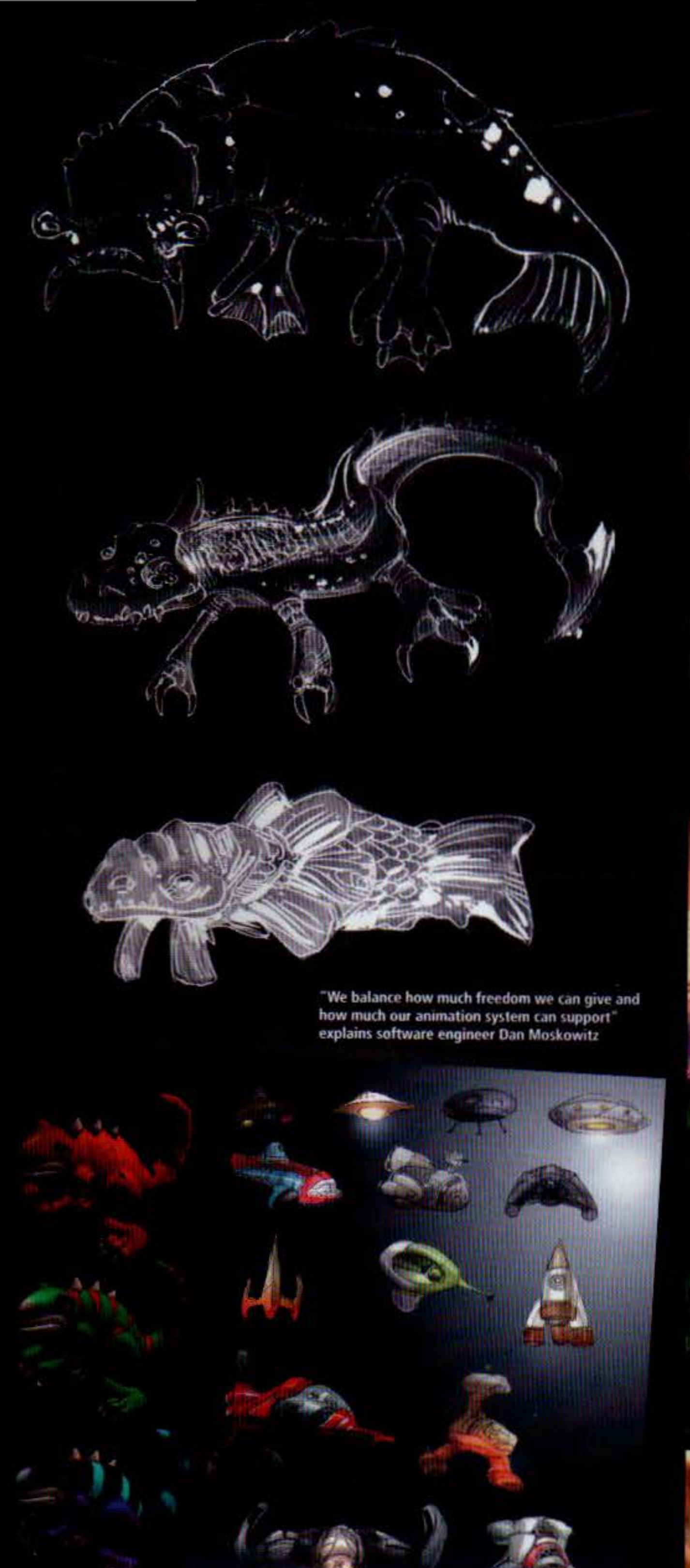


Genre studies

"Normally the idea of doing a cross-genre game, say a firstperson shooter RTS – that's a hard design problem, but you pile on six other genres and it's a *really* hard design problem," says Wright. One of the challenges facing *Spore's* ambitious design is providing a consistent interface and control scheme for a game that spans six different gameplay types.

Spore, the first stage, is a top-down single-celled game of protozoan *Pac-Man*. Creature, a directly-controlled game of survival, sees the player working in herds and packs, and ultimately finding a mate. The offspring from Creature eventually evolve into Tribes, Cities, and Civilizations, following familiar relationship building and need-fulfilment themes from Wright's earlier *Sims* games. Eventually, if successful, your creatures will make their first forays into Space, allowing players to freely traverse the millions of stars at will, exploring an ever-changing galaxy with content being created and provided by other players. It's at this final stage that the creature editor becomes a free-play sandbox to collect and disperse more of your own creature creations throughout the universe.





"We balance how much freedom we can give and how much our animation system can support" explains software engineer Dan Moskowitz







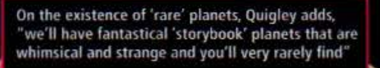








A simple law of averages ensures that not every planet out of the millions available in *Spore* will be as richly and densely populated as the others, although Wright says even the most barren might bear some fruit in the form of an otherwise unavailable alien artefact, making every stop a potential lottery



On the existence of 'rare' planets, Quigley adds, "we'll have fantastical 'storybook' planets that are whimsical and strange and you'll very rarely find"

every case, failure, in *Spore* terms, isn't necessarily a non-option. "One of Will's themes that we're depending on heavily is 'if you're going to fail, fail funny.' The hope is if you start making some crazy-ass creature, like this guy" – he swings SPASM's view to an unnaturally asymmetrical decapod-plus – "has 11 legs. You have no idea how an 11-legged creature would walk, so if he stumbles over himself, it's like: 'Hey, that's on purpose.' If we can hit one animation that works for 80 per cent of the creatures, do a couple others that suck up the last 15 per cent, and the remaining five per cent fail humorously, then we're golden."

As we're given another look at the quick-stop, highly-compressed tour through *Spore*'s outwardly expanding universe, we're struck once again with both awe at its immensity and the irresistible wanderlust its pull-out spiral arms inspire, but also with the sense of the enormity that's left to be implemented. Two years in design, but only recently being fully developed, the gameplay in Space, the final frontiering section of *Spore*, is hinted at with new inter-species dialogues brought up when planetary neighbours complain of their homeworld being attacked after an accidental war is instigated.

How much more of that diplomacy and negotiations can be expected? "Quite a bit more," Wright explains. "Actually, we're going to have interstellar alliances, and you're going to be able to interact with any level of planet that you come across, from barren, to wild, to tribal, city, civ – each one's going to have kind of different game dynamics.

"Once you get into interacting with other space-faring races, it's a broader palette of options. At that point, you can choose to attack them, form an alliance, trade or get missions – there'll be missions generated at that level. But I think the relationship game at the interstellar level is going to be an elaboration of the relationship game that we have down at the civilisation level, where I have a nation with good or bad relationships: I might be trading partners with these guys, I might be culturally trying to influence *these* guys, but attacking *those* guys, all the way back to the tribal level where it's very simple little interactions between the tribes. This relationship structure, that starts at the tribal level in a very simple way, gets elaborated into city, civ and then into space where it probably gets the most elaborate."

Is that interstellar exploration always the ultimate goal of the game, or can players have equally rich experiences at lower levels? "The advancement between levels is always optional for the player, the player is the one that pulls the trigger on the advancement, so if they want to stay at Creature level they can stay there as long as they want to. It's up to them to pull the trigger on advancing to Tribe. We fully expect that certain players will enjoy certain levels more than others, and also once you get to the Space game you can in some ways revisit levels from that point of view, so if you really enjoyed the creature ecology game you can genetically engineer creatures for free now in the editor and use them to populate worlds."



First contact with a newly discovered off-world species is a moral dilemma in which the player can choose to impress with a fireworks display, culturally persuade with a concert or, more simply, spark potential inter-planetary war by laying waste to their civilisation

Coming off the back of the *Sims* series, whose domestic themes in part managed to garner it its best-selling audience, we try to pin down whether its sci-fi underpinnings might be potentially off-putting to a more casual audience. "You never know," Wright confesses. "When I was first pitching the idea for *The Sims* and it was about taking out the trash and cleaning the toilets, everybody said that's



Creature labs

It's hard to overstate just how instantly accessible and endlessly addictive *Spore*'s creature editor is, or how quickly a maternal bond is formed with your creation the first time you drag on the last required body part and your creature snaps to life with a stretch and a roar.

"The metaphor that I use," says Gingold, "is 'magic crayons.' The nice thing about a crayon is that it's easy for a child to pick up: it's friendly, it's attractive, and you don't have to work very hard to do anything with it." Similarly, with *Spore*'s creature editor, "you can just pull out a leg and you already have something, you can just doodle. But the reason this is magic is it's a Pinocchio. The thing actually comes to life."

The editor is deliberately a pursuit in itself – not just an interstitial between stages to add an extra claw or pair of legs for upgraded fighting technique, but the game's necessary basic input device for player creativity. While a catalogue of stock parts are available for quick no-hassle building, experienced players can snap limbs apart at the joint with a click of the right mouse button to further customise their avatars.





The brains behind *Spore*, Will Wright. His first game, *Raid On Bungeling Bay*, was released on C64 in 1984

















Should your creature find itself unfit for survival, players will regress back to the egg with an opportunity to redesign and replay the level. Players can optionally double their bet and extend play through a long generation and bank DNA points without mating, but risk losing them all to a surprise attack

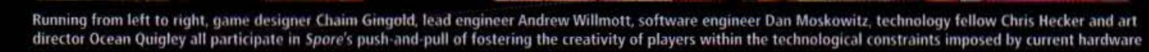


Outward expansion

Spore's cross-platform ambitions are no longer a secret but, as Wright explains, each respective game will broaden the scope of the world rather than a straight scale-down. "With *The Sims* we basically said: 'Let's take this core experience and put it on different platforms.' *Spore* we're thinking about as a franchise from the start, and the PC version just happens to be the first version of the franchise."

Cards for every object encountered in the world are collected in a so-called Sporepedia that tracks not only the object's creator, but essential stats as well, which Wright says might form the basis of its outward expansion. "*Spore* is deconstructable in interesting ways: we can pull out specific levels, like a Creature level, and make it a handheld experience, or take some of the meta games that we have, like the trading cards, and turn them into an actual card game, either with physical cards or on your cellphone. We're looking at different things that all relate to *Spore*, but aren't necessarily the entire game squeezed onto every single platform."

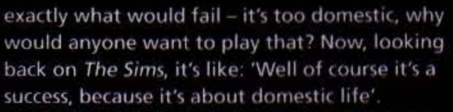




Running from left to right, game designer Chaim Gingold, lead engineer Andrew Willmott, software engineer Dan Moskowitz, technology fellow Chris Hecker and art director Ocean Quigley all participate in *Spore*'s push-and-pull of fostering the creativity of players within the technological constraints imposed by current hardware



"We *may* have explicitly authored planets that are almost easter egg-y," hints Quigley with a grin, "like hey, is Earth anywhere in this galaxy?"



exactly what would fail – it's too domestic, why would anyone want to play that? Now, looking back on *The Sims*, it's like: 'Well of course it's a success, because it's about domestic life'.

"I think it's almost more about accessibility, so that somebody without a lot of knowledge of Tolkien or D&D or military history can come in, start pressing buttons and having an enjoyable time, and then learn the game. Even though the themes seem kind of science-y, people understand roughly the way creatures move around, a little bit about evolution, a little bit about astronomy, but it's not required at all.

"The primary thing is it needs to be something where they're getting instant reward, that they don't have a hardcore NPC coming and kicking their butt every five minutes, and that they can go off in the direction that they want to go off. That might be the creative direction of spending a lot of time decorating their creature, it might be the strategy direction of tuning their city just right and doing the layout, or it might be the more MMO-like experience in the UFO, going around collecting rares and trading."

But thus far it seems the only way to collect the DNA points – the game's helixed currency necessary for evolving and upgrading your creature from state to state – is primarily tied to combat and domination, but Wright assures us that persevering pacifists will not be without their own options.

"It is right now, and we're trying to make it less so. For instance, right now you get DNA points for eating the egg of something else. Doing that you can sneak around and just eat eggs as a scavenger and earn DNA points without ever fighting, and we're probably going to distribute a few more activities like that in the world. Of course, most of what we've also demonstrated are carnivores, so you should be able to earn plenty of DNA points just by eating fruit, in which case combat is more for self defence."

And are your creatures, responsible for putting out the mating call to find willing partners and advance the game forward, always the male of the species? "Actually, we haven't even figured out the sex of the character – right now, every creature is poly-sexual. It's a funny fiction, but I think it's just going to be simpler that way. When you do the mating call, there'll only be a certain percentage of your species that will respond to it, and you might interpret that as only the females are responding, or only the ones in heat are responding. I'd rather keep that somewhat ambiguous from the player's point of view, but I suppose what it comes down to is when you mate, which one lays the egg," he laughs.



Every vehicle and building can be custom designed, but Moskowitz stresses the difficulty of making players into architects: "With a creature when you pull the head off, you get this suggestion – it has a personality already. You don't really get that with buildings"

"I THINK THAT'S A DEEPER MESSAGE, THAT EVERYBODY HAS MORE CREATIVITY IN THEM THAN THEY THINK THEY HAVE"



Lead engineer Andrew Willmott calls Space, the final stage, the most challenging from a design perspective: "Unlike the other games, which we've been prototyping for four years, Space has really only started to be implemented. It's ambitious, too – Will says that Space is as big as all the other games put together"

That Wright has a deeper modus operandi than simply funny fiction with *Spore* was hinted at in his whirlwind of a lecture at this year's Game Developer's Conference, and again, when elucidated, the underlying message that it's about people – a game made by people for people to make the game – becomes all the more clear. "I think a more personal message is that everybody has in some sense a universe inside of them, in their imagination, that with the right toolset they can pour it out and instantiate it. I just like the idea that every person is going to create their own unique universe in the game, bit by bit, creature by creature, building by building, eventually they'll step back and say: 'Wow, I've created this entire world,' which to me is very powerful.

"The first time I ever played *Myst*, this beautifully rendered world, I was moving around and the first thing that occurred to me was: 'You know, somebody had a blast building this world, and I would love to have the toolset to build a world like that'. I think that's a deeper message, that everybody has more creativity in them than they think they have."

And after the completion of *Spore*, his *SimEverything*, what's left? "Nothing. I've always wanted to do *SimNothing*. Wouldn't that be a great game?"



THE NEXT CRUSADE

RESTRUCTURED, RESTAFFED AND RESETTLED IN A SHINY NEW HOME, LUCASARTS IS FINALLY READY TO RECPATURE THE PIONEERING SPIRIT

The dining room of the Letterman Digital Arts Center – the new San Francisco home of most of George Lucas' entertainment businesses, including his long-lived game studio and publisher, LucasArts – boasts a spectacular view. Glance through the left of the immense canteen's three glass walls and the graceful suspension spires of the Golden Gate bridge rise above a bluish fog that still clings to the bay in defiance of the crystalline North California morning. Straight ahead and up close, the classical dome of the Palace of Fine Arts looms large over diners and burns bronze in the sun. To the right, the needle-like Transamerica Pyramid offices prick the busy swell of the downtown skyline. This is just about the only place in San Francisco where you can see all three of these signature landmarks at once: landmarks that respectively symbolise engineering, art and commerce, the three pillars of Californian business in general, and this Californian business in particular.

No part of it more so than a resurgent, determined LucasArts. This is where three internal teams are working on three projects –

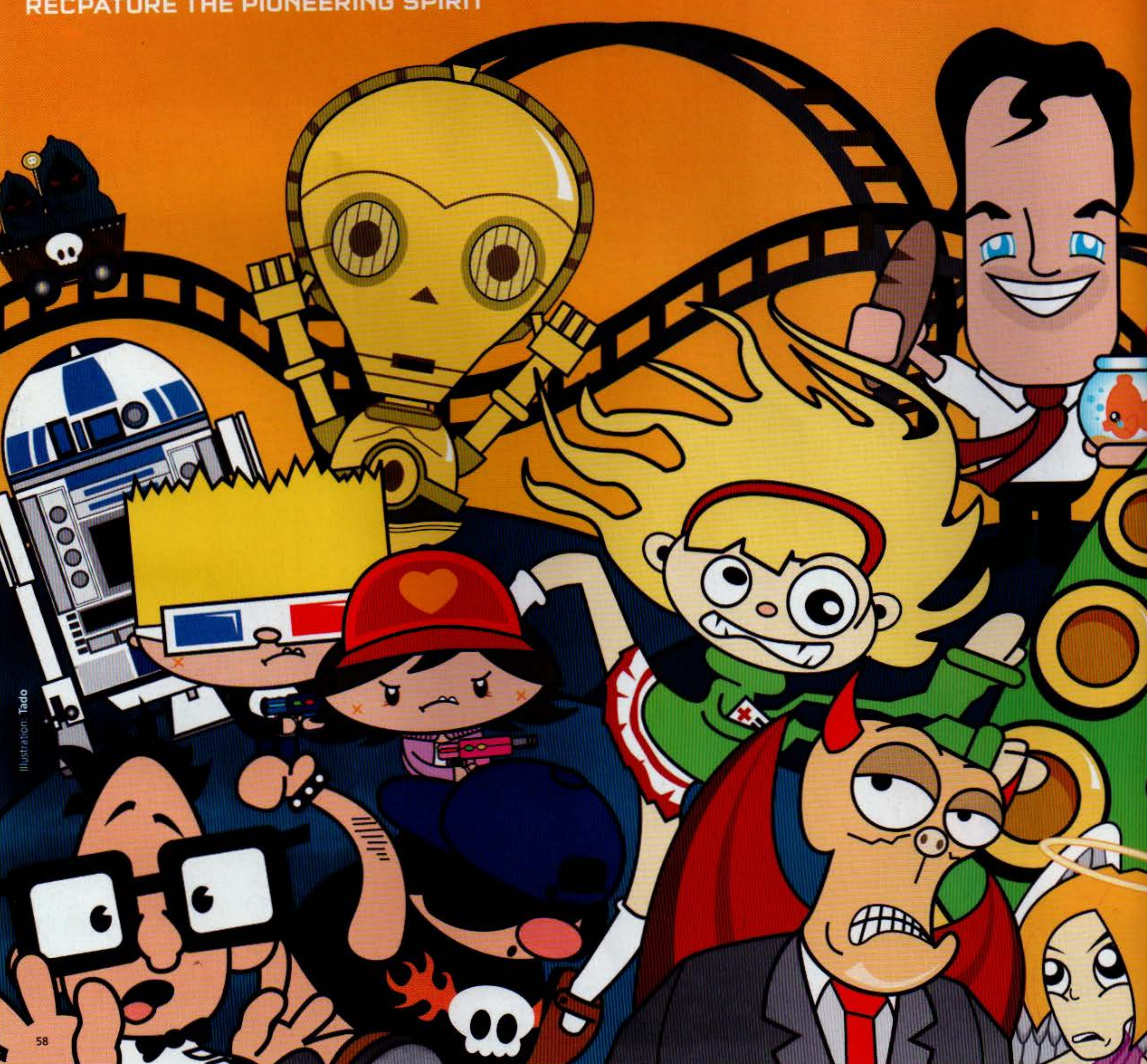


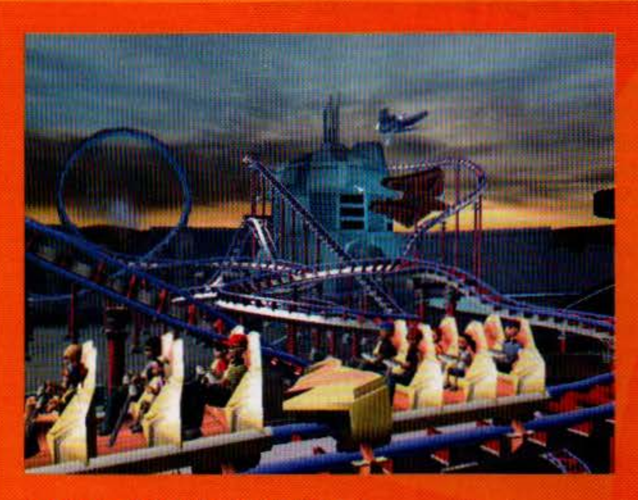
Illustration: Tado

an Indiana Jones game, a Star Wars game, and an entirely original title currently at the 'incubator' stage – that will end years of near-silence from the developer, starting with *Indy* next summer. Details are scarce on that game and non-existent on the other two – *Star Wars* is mentioned in the same breath as the franchise's new TV series, but that may be mere coincidence. But it's hoped that they'll restore to LucasArts the ideals it was born with: cutting-edge technology, storytelling skill and mass appeal; engineering, art and commerce. It's a revival that's been a long time coming.

In a prescient move, the father of Star Wars had founded the Lucasfilm Games Group (subsequently Lucasfilm Games and LucasArts) back in 1982, initially in collaboration with Atari and then standing it on its own two feet as a self-publishing development studio. So began over a decade of feverish in-house innovation that encompassed both technology – such as the early experiments in fractal procedural generation, the legendary point-and-click SCUMM interface for adventure games, or its early embrace of the possibilities of CD-ROM – and attempts to deepen the humanity, humour and storytelling sophistication of videogame content. Such was the company's energy and thirst for originality that it didn't make its own Star Wars game for more than ten years, preferring to let third parties handle the licence; and when it finally did, it was the superlative *X-Wing*. But the run of form couldn't last. As the '90s waned and the bottom fell out of its bread-and-butter adventure market, LucasArts' internal development staff dwindled, the quality of the games slid and the company fell back on outsourcing its ballooning range of Star Wars spin-offs, effectively becoming a highly specialised mini-publisher. "We got really, really small," remembers **Peter Hirschmann**, vice president of development and president Jim Ward's right-hand man, with a shake of the head.

Things began to look up in 2002, when Lucas prompted a restructuring, encouraging the firm to start making plans for the next generation of consoles and ramping up its internal teams once more. The appointment of Lucasfilm marketing chief Ward as president two years later was another shot in the arm, the tough-talking executive generating some heat around the company with his aggressive populist agenda (see our interview with him in **E**165). This coincided with some much more imaginative and successful external commissioning, with Bioware's stately *Knights Of The Old Republic*, Pandemic's popular *Battlefront* and the surprise breakthrough of Giant's *Lego Star Wars* reviving the Star Wars gaming brand





THRILLVILLE

Alongside Kuju's PSP music game *Traxion*, which will generate rhythm-action minigames from your own tunes, *Thrillville* continues the drive for massmarket, all-ages accessibility that began with *Lego Star Wars*, and which LucasArts has seemed happy to leave in British hands since. David Braben's Frontier is trading on its *Rollercoaster Tycoon* experience to bring the theme-park simulator to consoles – specifically PS2, Xbox and PSP – at the end of this year, and in a markedly different form.

For starters, you will explore your park and interact with customers directly in thirdperson (either as the youthful manager or as anyone you hire and train), which along with a progressive mission structure ought to make the genre a much more comfortable prospect for couch-bound action gamers. Secondly, the parks provide a context for minigames, from obvious candidates like arcade games and shooting galleries to some more subtly integrated events: karting on self-built tracks, rhythm-action cheerleading to boost customer morale and circuit-board puzzles standing in for ride maintenance. These will be available either from within your park, with realtime sim bustle continuing unabated around, or directly from the frontend in a multiplayer party-game suite.

Frontier has worked long and hard on the coaster-building interface and it already looks extremely streamlined – as it has to be for the eight-year-olds playtesting it – while the social simulation elements have a pleasant directness and obvious, *Sims*-style mass appeal. *Thrillville* maybe not be the sexiest proposition on paper, but it looks bright, busy, thorough and hugely extensive, and as a package should be leagues ahead of the drab afterthought that is the average kids' game these days.







The campus halls are decorated with a combination of Industrial Light & Magic artworks and models (left), and George Lucas' magnificent personal collection of movie posters. The sculpted parkland that surrounds it is generously open to the public (right)

and giving LucasArts its biggest critical and commercial hits in years. There was even, in the shape of *Mercenaries* (Pandemic again), some fresh IP. The transformation was completed a year ago when LucasArts (along with Lucasfilm and film effects house Industrial Light & Magic) moved from the secluded Skywalker Ranch and its environs to a brand new campus in the heart of San Francisco, and started to recruit in earnest. But still there was no news. What, exactly, were those internal teams doing? And was a return to the forward-thinking independent spirit of LucasArts' golden age too much to hope for?

"IF WE CAN SPEND MONEY TO SAVE TIME, THAT'S THE BEST INVESTMENT"

The answer, from Hirschmann, is an emphatic no. In fact, the sea changes began with a refocusing on technological innovation – specifically, procedural generation of content in realtime – that exactly echoes the company's first two, fractally-inspired titles from over 20 years ago, *Ballblazer* and *Rescue On Fractalus!* "Back in 2002 when we did our reboot, George asked: 'What is your plan for next-gen? What is your studio philosophy moving forward?' What we presented was that we think the future of gaming is simulation-based. We made the assumption that everything's going to look pretty, it's going to be hard to make ugly games, just because you're going to have things like complex lighting and material systems that really help visually, it's not just about how many triangles are in there. If everyone's going to have pretty-looking games, what's the new opportunity with these systems? And the answer was going simulation-based, because with that additional horsepower you can start truly constructing things that are – forgive me for using such a grossly overused buzzword – emergent.

"We have this whole idea of gameplay per square foot. We've all played games where one little thing is so fun and so rich that you have more fun doing that one thing than you have on complete other products. And oftentimes it was because that wasn't a binary, linear, pre-baked sort of thing, it was because there were a set of variables… I don't want to get too GDC symposium here [makes snoring noise], but the player was allowed to use their imagination and creativity to do something, whether it was a game like *X-Com* or *Half-Life*. In *Half-Life* I would play some encounters for hours and hours just to see what happened, because the AI was so good."

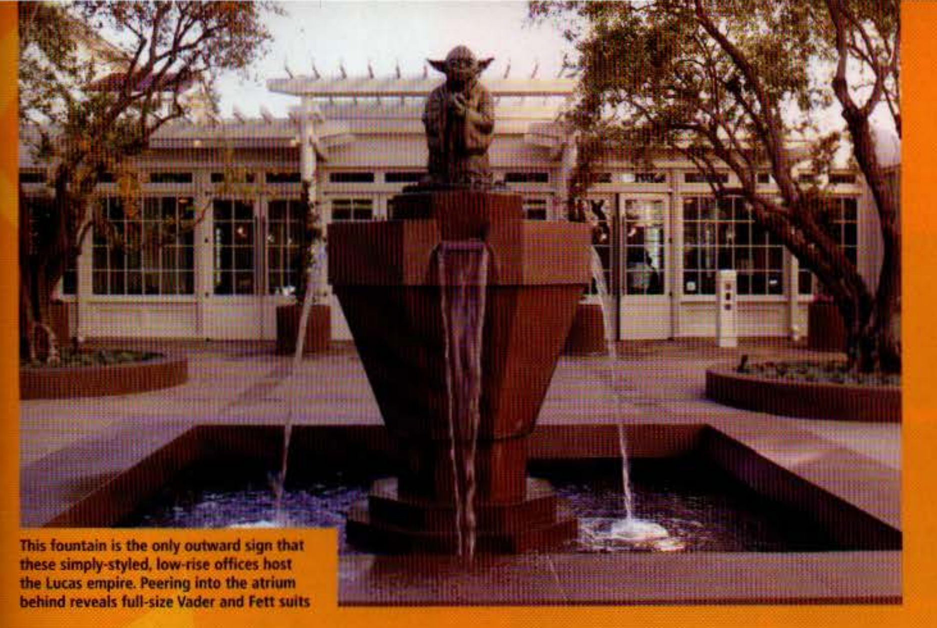
With little internal R&D effort to speak of, LucasArts started shopping for technologies that would help create the endlessly permutating playgrounds it sought. ("We have a philosophy here that if we can spend money to save time, that's always the best investment, and there's certainly not any kind of not-invented-here syndrome," says Hirschmann.) It found two. The first is NaturalMotion's Euphoria, a realtime animation engine – or, as LucasArts has termed it, 'biomechanical AI' – that allows onscreen characters to react to whatever conditions they face according to a system of behavioural and physical rules, rather than preset animation routines (see Codeshop, **E**165). The second is Pixelux's Digital Molecular Matter (DMM), a material physics system that replaces or interfaces with traditional rigid-body physics

FINE ARTS

LucasArts' internal studios may have been diminished in recent years, with few noteworthy releases to their name, but their pedigree is one of the longest, smartest and most diverse in American development. Read on for 12 classics and curios from a quarter-century of adventures in digital entertainment






This fountain is the only outward sign that these simply-styled, low-rise offices host the Lucas empire. Peering into the atrium behind reveals full-size Vader and Fett suits

and can replicate, with uncanny accuracy, the movement, fracture and distortion of any substance, be it wood, metal, jelly or flesh. DMM is exclusive to LucasArts until 2008, and the two technologies will feature in both the upcoming *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* games.

They may not be home-grown, but LucasArts has made a considerable investment of time as well as money in the two systems. "NaturalMotion had their Endorphin product and we though, God, if this worked in runtime, that's exactly what we're looking for," remembers Hirschmann. "So we sent a group of guys over to Oxford, and the brilliant chaps that they are had the same idea and were looking for a way to cross the boundary. So we spent two years working with them hooking that brilliant stuff they had into a game environment. We put a huge stake in the ground and took a big risk on building our games around the possibility of biomechanical AI, AI-driven behaviours and animation.

"The same thing happened with Pixelux and DMM," continues the energetic Hirschmann, who came to LucasArts from Steven Spielberg's Amblin entertainment, where he wrote and produced the first *Medal Of Honor*, and whose excitement about both technologies is still palpable. "My favourite definition of luck is 'preparedness meets opportunity'. Pixelux was one of those lucky things when one of our guys was at a party – a Burning Man planning session – bumped into someone else, got talking, the other guy said I know these guys who are interested, this is their website. The next day we loaded it up and went: 'Holy-! If this stuff does what it's supposed to...' Thank God they were local, we had them up within a couple of days, and halfway through the presentation they made this comment: what you've got to be careful about when you're using this is that when you build stuff it has to be structurally sound, because if the house isn't built right, it'll fall down. And I'm thinking: 'OH MY GOD!' We looked at them and said: 'We believe in your vision'. It was like eloping. And that was over a year ago, they moved in on-site, they've been so great to work with."

Working with such fluid, unpredictable technologies presents an immense design challenge; how do you stop the player breaking everything if they can break anything; how do you sculpt the action if enemies move with minds of their own? To use Hirschmann's own example of turning a wall to ice and smashing through it to escape your enemies, how do you prevent players bypassing a whole level? There are no specific answers yet: crucially, the exact extent to which DMM will be applied (20 per cent of the game furniture? 50 per cent? 100 per cent?) in *Indiana Jones* and beyond hasn't yet been determined. **Vik Sohal**, Pixelux's chief operating officer, is optimistic that the figures will be high. "Our company's goal is to make the creation of assets in games automated, but the thing is that people are used to making games a certain way, so it really depends on how adoption proceeds. Obviously we'd like to make everything out of DMM. The LucasArts guys are pretty aggressive in that way, they've got an idea about having simulation integral in games, so they're adopting it in a big way. And the first iterations will be enough that you'll feel like everything's live. We have a lot of ways to reduce the processor overhead, so you'll have an expansive environment where things feel physically real and you'll interact with them without using up a lot of CPU time."



Sohal is keen to point out that using DMM doesn't mean designers have to surrender totally to the laws of physics, either: "One thing we're very sensitive to is that game designers want to be able to adjust things – they're not letting go of the creative process. For example if you have a wall, and you want to make part of the wall weaker for some mechanics thing, you can do that, and it will break generally along that boundary." For his part, Hirschmann acknowledges the challenge and relishes the change, feeling it focuses designers on the pure pleasure of interaction. "We're figuring out how to design with this stuff as we go. It just changes a lot, your pre-existing understanding of how

BALLBLAZER

FORMAT: Apple II, Atari 5200 & 7800, CPC, C64 **YEAR:** 1984



The fledgling Games Group's first collaboration with Atari was this futurist game of one-on-one, firstperson football. The speed and fluidity with which the Rotofoils slid and recoiled around the basic pitch was impressive on the 8bit Atari consoles, but it's the randomly generated algorithmic jazz soundtrack that really stands out today

RESCUE ON FRACTALUS!

FORMAT: Apple II, Atari 5200, C64, CPC, Spectrum **YEAR:** 1984



Procedurally-generated landscapes formed part of early PS3 hype, but LucasArts broke that ground some 20 years ago with the other initial Atari release, a tremendously advanced 3D flight over fractal extra-terrestrial mountains. The suspenseful wait to see if rescued pilots would turn out to be alien impostors was an early sign of Lucas's narrative flourish

KORONIS RIFT

FORMAT: Apple II, C64, CPC, MSX, Spectrum, **YEAR:** 1985



Fractalus' fractal technology spawned two more hits the following year. *The Eidolon* had the more arresting premise – a dungeon-crawl through your own subconscious – but space-scavenger *Koronis Rift* just had the edge in terms of gameplay sophistication, allowing scavenged items to either be converted into cash or used to upgrade your ship

MOUNTAINS OUT OF MOLECULES

"We took Maya and created a helix and some stairs, then we put it in DMM, changed the material properties of the helix to spring steel, and it became a slinky. Better than any slinky I ever played with," says Sohal with a grin. It's as fine a summary of the advantages of his company's new technology as you could wish for; almost instant creation of complex physical assets that immediately become absorbing toys in themselves.

When you take an axe to a door in a game today, no matter how realistic the effect, it cracks along lines predermined by an artist. DMM actually simulates what happens to the wood if it's hit just there; it can make it disintegrate like balsa or buckle like hardwood. Or dent like metal, smash like glass, crack like plastic, deform like rubber – anything from Pixelux's library of materials, each of which is individually customisable by developers.

The Star Wars-themed DMM demo LucasArts took to E3 is a dazzling demonstration of DMM's full range, allowing the player to chuck R2D2s at every conceivable surface from jelly to organic matter and watch them respond. Stresses are even simulated across complex structures, with braced roof beams breaking less easily than free-standing ones, and top-heavy crystals toppling and crushing themselves. It is simply breathtaking technology, and will be as cosmetic or integral as each developer wants it to be; even if design restrictions limit it to a cosmetic aid, its impact will be huge. When LucasArts' exclusivity expires in October 2008, Pixelux should expect a stampede to its doors.










game design should work kind of goes out the window, and it just comes back to that idea of the most gameplay per square foot that you can manage.

It's clear that preparing LucasArts for its creative rebirth has already been a long road – some four years and counting – and despite the internal studios' silence, and the scarcity of details on their games, the behind-the-scenes work has been intense. Hirschmann is particularly keen to stress that Ward's public berating of the games industry for allowing its games to go over time and over budget, and promise that LucasArts will never do so, in no sense means that the company is making games fast and on the cheap. It means, rather, taking a chance on speculative development, picking a date later in the process, and then making the decision stick.

"Publishing infrastructure – integrated marketing plans, retail plans, the creativity that goes into the marketing – only fires on all cylinders when they have a date to work towards. It's just about acknowledging that and having the patience. We've invested heavily in games that weren't greenlit… it's about taking the risks upfront. Locking it on a date and a budget after a month or two months of pre-pro and figuring it out, that's rolling the dice, that's crazy. With the internal stuff, we spent a year on *Indy* and *Star Wars* before we were all on the same page with what they were, and set the day and the

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND
FORMAT: Amiga, Mac, PC, ST **YEAR:** 1990



It was 1987 when Aric Wilmunder and Ron Gilbert unleashed the Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion (SCUMM) on the world and began a decade-long run of comic adventure classics based on the engine. But it was three years later that Gilbert delivered his true masterpiece, a sardonic and self-aware comedy of errors with added monkeys and pirates

NIGHT SHIFT
FORMAT: Amiga, C64, CPC, PC, Spectrum, ST **YEAR:** 1990



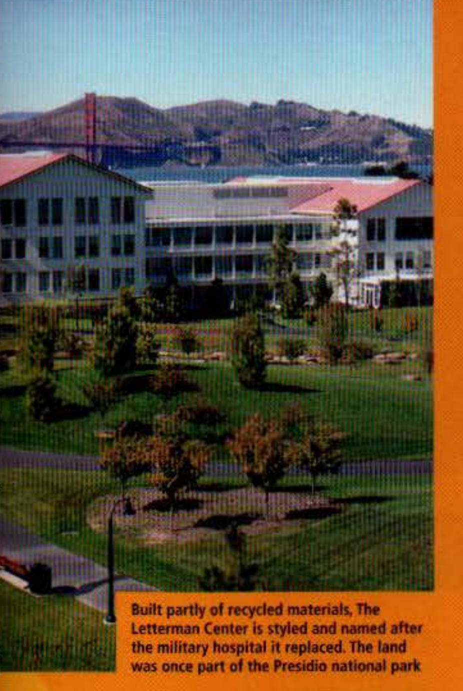
A tidy little action/puzzle game in itself, and one that is beautifully illustrated, it's *Night Shift*'s jokey premise that makes it noteworthy today. The objective was to keep toy company Industrial Might & Logic's machines churning out an incessant stream of Star Wars and Indiana Jones merchandise, an ironic foreshadowing of LucasArts' own fate

STAR WARS: X-WING
FORMAT: PC **YEAR:** 1993



Lucas' proof-of-concept rough cuts of Star Wars featured footage of WWII dogfights in place of effects sequences; appropriately enough, *X-Wing* and its sequels – classics of their kind – were an extension of the WWII air combat simulators Larry Holland had made previously at LucasArts. It was also, astonishingly, the first in-house Star Wars project




Built partly of recycled materials, The Letterman Center is styled and named after the military hospital it replaced. The land was once part of the Presidio national park

never have had those advances in that genre. The lesson from those days is to keep pushing forward." He refers obliquely to moments when the company has flirted with reviving the tradition – its cancelled *Sam & Max* sequel springs immediately to mind – as negative, retrospective thinking. His tone is sad but decisive, and he applauds indie adventurers Telltale Games for stepping into the breach it left with that title.

Ward's evangelical stance – similar to Nintendo's – on broadening the market is currently more evident in LucasArts' work with external developers than with its internal projects, where the immensely popular licences can be expected to do much of the legwork. It may have been slow to recognise the importance of *Lego Star Wars* in that respect, but you can be sure that game's name reverberates through the San Francisco campus now ("It's done great things for us with Moms," notes one member of


"IF WE'D ALWAYS BEEN LOOKING BACK, YOU'D NEVER HAVE HAD SAM & MAX"

budget. It's not like we were off spinning our wheels and coming up with a thousand ideas, it was advancing chunk by chunk, and it's not just design, it's starting the production and marketing plans. It's having the patience upfront so that you can pay off on the back end."

And though Hirschmann is happy to discuss LucasArts' proud heritage and his desire to get closer to its standards and goals in the company's current output, he firmly believes that this should never result in reflection on past glories. Yes, that does mean the label's peerless record in adventure games, a genre it abandoned in 2000 with *Escape From Monkey Island*, a desertion that disenfranchised fans seem never to have forgiven. "If we'd always been looking back, you'd never have had *Sam & Max* or *Full Throttle* or *Grim Fandango*, you'd

the marketing team). Its lessons are quite evident in Frontier's democratic and immediate *Thrillville* (see boxout), the social aspects of which – both on- and offscreen – are as clearly aimed at females and parents as its cheerful visuals are at kids; how Kuju's PSP music title *Traxion* fits into this picture is less clear.

For his part, Hirschmann is happy to focus on simple accessibility, especially in the interface. "I always tell teams that when you make something accessible you're not making it dumber, you're making it smarter. It's really easy to make complex UI. Part of the iPod's success is its simplicity, and they didn't just sit down one day and say: 'OK, here it is'. The time and effort that goes into making something accessible is hard, especially if you're making a game that has a lot of genre conventions." Is there one thing

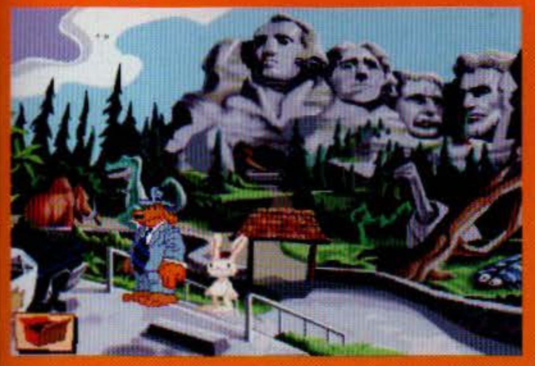





From top to bottom: Steve Sullivan, director of research and development at Industrial Light & Magic; Peter Hirschmann, vice president of development at LucasArts and Vik Sohal, the chief operating officer at development tools firm Pixelux

he would change about wider industry that might stop it, in Ward's word, 'flatlining'? "I'd change how we manage the perception of games within the broader culture. Games are such a great form of entertainment, they don't replace books or movies or television... for the first time in 50 years it's a new form of entertainment that sits alongside those. When you're

SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD
FORMAT: PC **YEAR:** 1993


Sam & Max creator Steve Purcell worked as an artist at LucasArts, and his anarchic pair of cartoon PIs had a strip in the company newsletter. Eventually they, and he, were granted their own game there, and its satirical view of America and new graphical SCUMM interface made it a cult smash still loved today. Purcell now works at Pixar

STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT
FORMAT: 3DO, Mac, MegaCD, PC, **YEAR:** 1994


Despite being the most questionable of these 12 games in terms of its quality, *Rebel Assault* is certainly one of the most influential. With its heavy emphasis on the use of looped, prerendered FMV and digitised movie scenes, it became an early killer-app for the (at the time) fledgling CD-ROM format, selling the new hardware by the ton

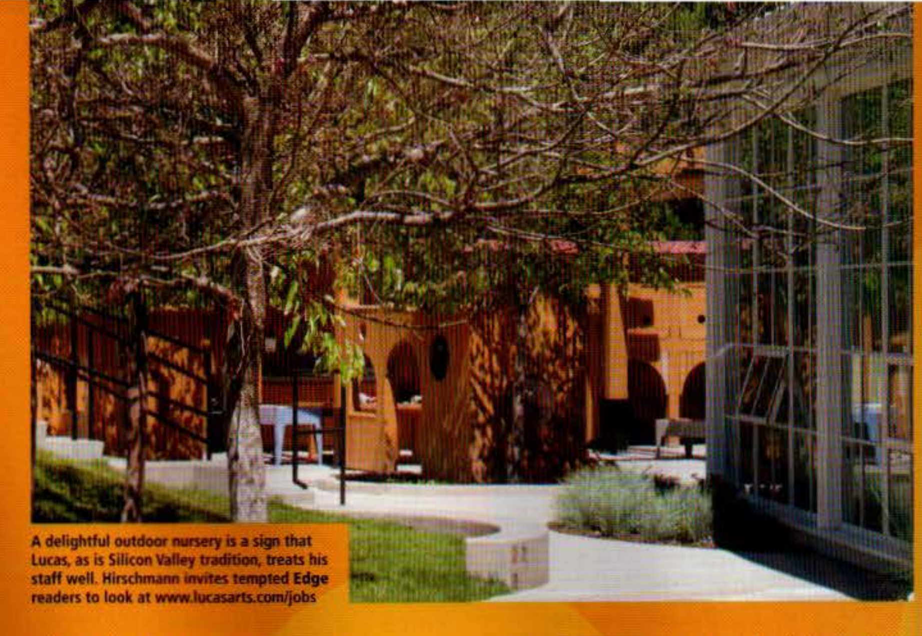
THE DIG
FORMAT: Mac, PC **YEAR:** 1995



A lesser SCUMM game, *The Dig* had a rarefied Hollywood pedigree for its time, being based on a Steven Spielberg story and with Robert Patrick leading its voice cast. But its space archaeology was too sober for SCUMM fans, and its extended development was rare evidence of LucasArts over-reaching itself in an attempt to squeeze movie concepts into games

in the entertainment business you want everyone to be able to know about and enjoy what you do, but still in 2006 you run into this lack of knowledge and understanding with a lot of mainstream media. There have been strides but with our government... it's almost comical how games are filling the slot that comic books did and rock and roll did."

The construction of the Letterman centre was a bold move for George Lucas. In its May 2005 issue, Wired magazine characterised it as the reclusive director's 'coming out', as he sought to finally put the Star Wars films behind him, and bring his work (with the exception of Skywalker Sound) out of the secretive seclusion of Skywalker Ranch and into the bright light of the bay. The handsome new campus is discreet in other ways: for one, it forgoes any mystique in its name for recognition of the Letterman Military Hospital that once stood on this part of the Presidio national park, and a small statue of Yoda is the only outward sign that this is the headquarters of a pop-cultural cult. Nevertheless, the public gardens and coffee shop, the buildings' acres of glass and sunlit stairwells speak of a dramatic change in the Lucas corporate culture.



A delightful outdoor nursery is a sign that Lucas, as is Silicon Valley tradition, treats his staff well. Hirschmann invites tempted Edge readers to look at www.lucasarts.com/jobs

"I HOPE THAT WE CAN GET THE GOLD GUY BACK TO THAT LEVEL OF TRUST"

It's an opportunity for the entertainment powerhouse to be more outward-facing and optimistic, but also more inward-facing too, in that its constituent parts are now encouraged to mix and deal with each other, and share resources. For LucasArts, that means a profitable collaboration with Industrial Light & Magic, with which, surprisingly, it has had few dealings before. "We started to look into gaming, and working more closely with LucasArts, a couple of years ago when we started to examine the capabilities of the next-gen consoles," says **Steve Sullivan**, head of R&D at Industrial Light & Magic. "Before that there was virtually no collaboration. The move to the new campus was also a huge factor in bringing us closer together, I can't tell you how much it has changed things. It's more about us sharing a unified platform – and sharing technology, expertise and resources at a fundamental level – than about us providing LucasArts with any assets to port over to their games as such. They're facing a content crisis on the next-gen consoles; you know, within ILM we've been facing that same content crisis for years and years now, so we can help them get past that. And they can help us with things such as rapid prototyping and virtual film sets."

Walking these spacious, but not ostentatious halls, you get a sense of a group of companies that are at ease with themselves, and each other, perhaps for the first time in a long while. We put it to Hirschmann: is LucasArts finally where it wants to be? His answer betrays a happy impatience to show the world what his reformed company can do. "The short answer is no, we're still growing. We still haven't released our internally-developed stuff. The external partners we have, we couldn't be happier, we're on the verge of announcing a new one soon. Internally, we're really excited, we had a lot of fun at E3, the next thing is we want to get the product out there. But we're still in that startup phase.

"I hope that we can get the gold guy back to that golden age level of trust. I would love for LucasArts to get back to the point that if you knew nothing about the game, you would go into the store, see it and want to buy it, just because you knew what that logo stood for. We're never going to get so big that can't be a possibility. It's the DNA of the company." And that could be the most encouraging thing we hear all day; that despite its desperation to fill its boots once more, as a developer LucasArts doesn't want to step up a size. It wants to stay nimble, restless, ambitious, curious. It wants to be LucasArts again.

AFTERLIFE
FORMAT: PC **YEAR:** 1996



Afterlife perfectly transposed core LucasArts values – daring thematic sophistication handled with an irreverent, light touch – to the god-game. Players were asked to build a heaven and hell that would cater to souls' needs for reward and punishment according to their brilliantly systematised belief tenets. Religion has never been so coolly exploited

JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II
FORMAT: Mac, PC **YEAR:** 1997

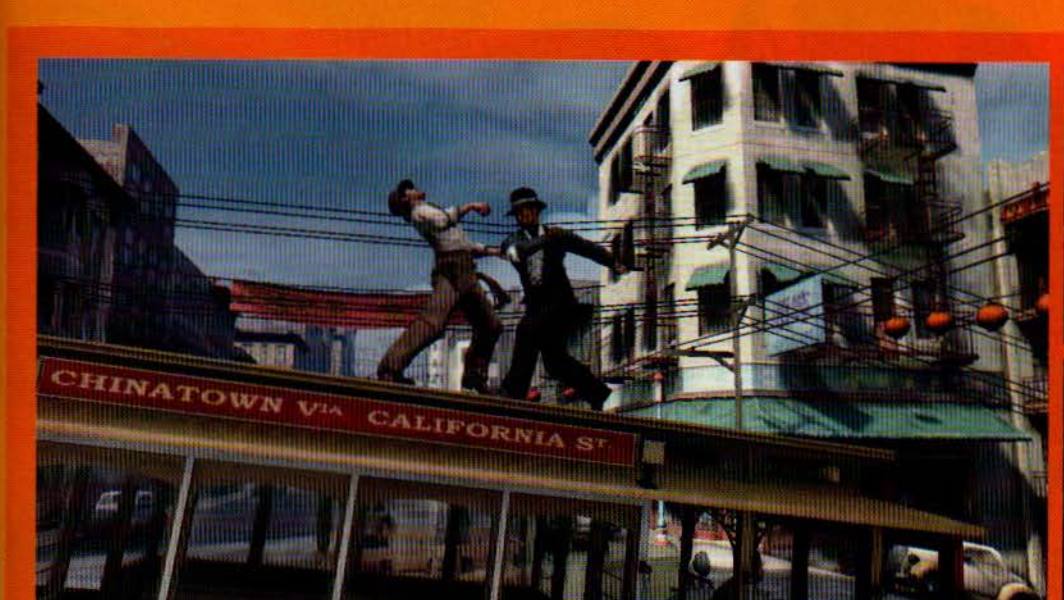


The *Dark Forces* series began as an answer to a rash of unofficial Star Wars *Doom* mods, but very much came into its own in this sequel, perhaps the first truly successful fulfilment of fans' dreams beyond space combat and introducing the lightsabre to the series. It would also be one of the last Star Wars games LucasArts would develop internally, until now

GRIM FANDANGO
FORMAT: PC **YEAR:** 1998



LucasArts finally moved its graphic adventures into 3D with *Grim Fandango*, but with their popularity on the wane and internal teams shrinking, it would be the studio's last but one entry in the genre. Its exquisitely-pitched noir pastiche could not be a more fitting swansong, though. A Tim Burton film adaptation is currently rumoured to be in the works





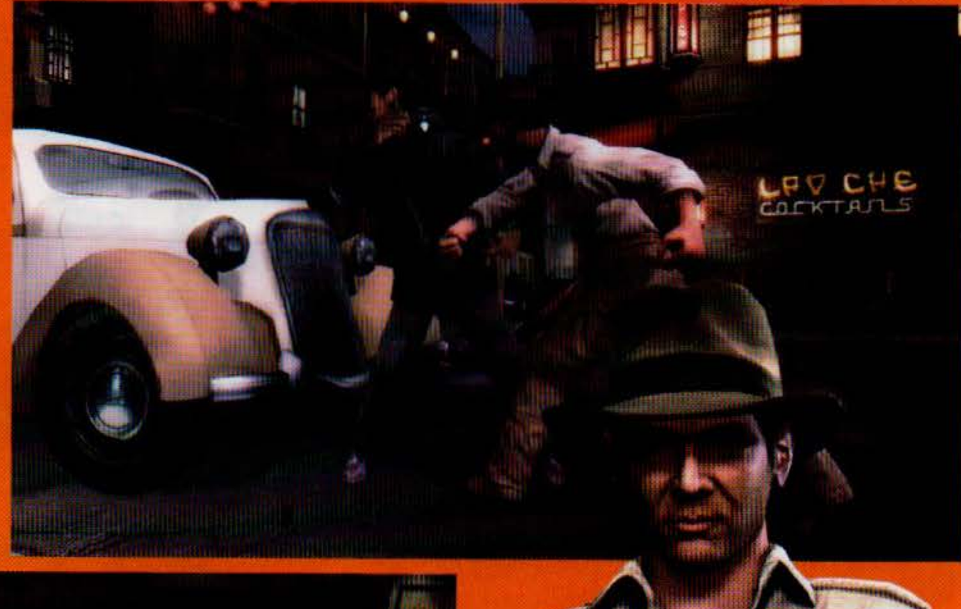


INDIANA JONES

Slated for a release in the summer of next year, *Indiana Jones 2007* no longer has anything to do (if it ever really did) with the troubled fourth film in the series, allowing LucasArts to proclaim it 'the next true Indiana Jones adventure'. Specifics are sparse and unsurprising: it will have a 1930s setting, feature the globe-trotting, chase-heavy action that is Indy's signature, span eight locations (including San Francisco) and appear on PS3 and 360.

The 360 tech demo at E3 is unfortunately only a little more conclusive as an in-situ demonstration of NaturalMotion and DMM, with the game still a year away. The biomechanical animation is almost too naturalistic, giving the back-alley brawling on show a slow, graceless pace where gamers are more used to exaggerated filmic snap. It can still look like over-cooked ragdoll after a punch connects, but seeing a hoodlum pick himself up from the twisted heap he's landed in is a hair-raising novelty.

The material physics provide a more immediate shock: the authentic and detailed behaviour of snapping wood or bending metal has huge visual impact. Larger-scale physical interactions lack weight at present, but there's time to fix that, and when the two technologies combine there's a genuine thrill of dangerous unpredictability. Much will depend on how deep an application of DMM LucasArts can manage, and how intuitive Indy's interactions with such a malleable, unstable world are. If these things come together, this could be a gloriously rowdy ride.







DIFFERENT FOR GIRLS

Illustration: Duncan Fegredo



TEN YEARS ON FROM LARA, WOMEN ARE STILL THE REAL ALIENS IN VIDEOGAMES. WHY IS IT SO HARD TO MAKE THEM THE STARS?

This year's E3 dazzled with lighting effects, explosions and new hardware, as is routine for this annual digital carnival, but it couldn't quite distract from a nagging sensation that something was missing. If the supposed crackdown on booth babes was barely appreciable, a more alarming absence of female presence was in the games themselves. Of the hundreds of major titles on display, just five had female leads. Two of those are provisional: *Heavy Rain*'s Mary Smith may only be the star of her casting session, and while *Final Fantasy XIII*'s trailer seemed to introduce a female lead – the core series' first, nearly as startling a revelation as if a *Zelda* game was headlined by Zelda – this was hurriedly played down in a following issue of Famitsu. Square Enix would like to feature a strong, independent woman, it assured, but not necessarily as the lead character. So, three then: *Tomb Raider Legend*'s handheld versions, *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*, and a single newcomer in *Heavenly Sword*. So while the debate still rages about getting women into gaming, it's clearer than





Nariko's different stances allow *Heavenly Sword* players to straddle the different fighting styles often divided between male and female characters. It's a smart solution to an ongoing design problem

ever that there's a simpler problem: how to get women into *games*. And that's a problem in three parts. At the business end is the question of whether or not gamers want to buy games that require them to play as a woman. At the in-between stage is the question of whether publishers are willing to take the risk of funding such projects – and a risk it remains, no matter how many millions *Tomb Raider* keeps shipping. But the core question is the one that gets asked least. Why aren't more developers trying to make games with

"WE WANTED TO CREATE A COMPLEX CHARACTER THAT YOU CAN EMPATHISE WITH. YOU CAN'T DO THAT IF SHE LOOKS LIKE A CHEAP HOOKER"

female leads? Is it that they don't want to, or is it that they don't know how? Just what changes about a game's design when you swap the chromosomes of its star?

"That's an interesting observation – I didn't notice," admits *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall* director **Ragnar Tørnquist**, as he considers the E3 headcount. "I really should have. I've made it a point to write roles for women in our games, and to talk about it – at length – but I still, shamefully, take it for granted that games have male protagonists." It's a sign of how deep-rooted the problem is if one of the most famously female-friendly game designers is himself a male-friendly game player, as he acknowledges: "The tough question is: would even I accept it if *Splinter Cell* got an extreme makeover and introduced us to Samantha Fisher, or the next *GTA* had a female ex-con looking for the boyfriend that betrayed her... are we, as hardcore gamers, ready for that? And if we aren't, how can we expect publishers to be? The alternative is brand new titles tailored to female leads, but the way the industry currently works, new ideas aren't particularly welcome – nor are female protagonists."

On the rare occasions that the industry is willing to accept a new idea and a new heroine, the result can be so successful it's hard to understand why that hesitation remains. There may be some weight to the argument that *Tomb Raider* was a one-off, but it becomes harder to dismiss the warmth of the reception of *Heavenly Sword* and its star Nariko. How hard did Ninja Theory have to fight during its search for a publisher to keep her as she is? "We explored having a male lead," confirms **Nina Kristensen**, chief development ninja and co-founder of Ninja Theory, when asked if there was pressure to change the character's gender, "but the concept just didn't feel right. Other publishers wanted more flesh showing, but we wanted to create a real sense of drama for a complex character that you can empathise with. You can't do that if she looks like a cheap hooker. We

INTO THE ORDINARY

Dreamers, students, photographers, pop stars – female leads have settled into roles outside military service with a success that shows games can revel in the everyday as much as Armageddon. *FFX-2* provided an extended coda for Yuna after saving the world, hanging up her summoner's robes and becoming a pop diva. Some reviewers (and many players) dismissed the game outright for opening with a dance number where *FFX* opened on the apocalypse, but its fearlessly constant reinvention of lead, and game, would do Bowie proud. In *Silent Hill 3*, meanwhile, Heather's worst day ever at the shopping mall preceded *Manhunt*'s exploration of the horror of suburbia: many of its most striking moments were free from supernatural dread, drawing instead on the adrenaline of a Little Girl Lost in the concrete woods. And both Zoë in *Dreamfall* and her predecessor April in *The Longest Journey* had smaller things to worry about than the imminent collision of science and magic: picking their way through the pieces of relationships with friends, family and modern life.



Dead Or Alive: Ultimate **lets women spend the whole game centre stage, but keeps them lifeless enough to make their role as eye-candy largely unsettling. Pretty but vacant is the rule of thumb**



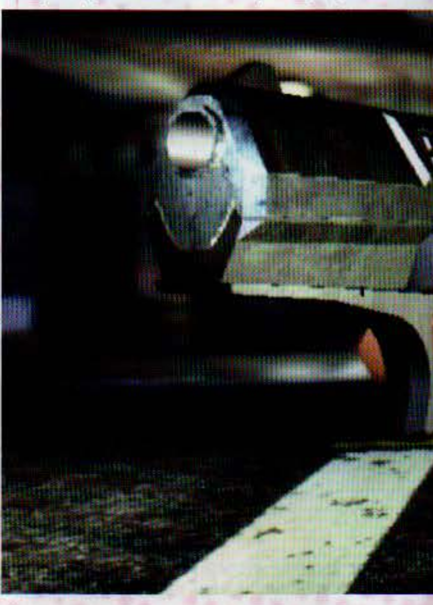
wanted Nariko to be elegant, beautiful, sexy, vulnerable and tough. Her life has not been easy, but it has shaped her character. There is no way she could be a typical starlet – she absolutely had to have a lot more edge and depth."

That tension – that publishers expect female characters to be whores on the boxart and helpers on the battlefield – seems endemic. **David Cage**, the man behind the startlingly ordinary character of Mary Smith used for the *Heavy Rain* trailer, is typically bullish about the situation: "There's something profoundly wrong about the way our industry deals with women. In most games, they have a role because they are sexy, or because we have to save them, or they have no role at all. It's a very simplistic vision created by moronic teenagers for moronic teenagers. I've often heard marketing departments, especially in the US, saying that a female character *has* to be sexy in order to have a chance in their territory – which is quite funny considering their absurd policies of censorship."

The result of this problem is to leave the status of most playable female characters in games as a flag to be flicked from 'male' to 'female' – an approach taken by the majority of unisex RPGs – rather than appreciating the fundamental differences it can make to the game experience. Examples of games where the femaleness of the leads makes a real difference to the experience are extremely rare: however tongue-in-cheek, *Final Fantasy X-2*'s female trio produced a slumber-party atmosphere perfect for the game's jumps between manic excitement and gentle nostalgia – and its Dressphere system, allowing the party to switch class roles with a swap of (fabulous) outfit, could only have worked with girlish abandon.

"Gender should never be simply an aesthetic choice, although for the most part, regrettably, it is," argues Tørnquist. "Men and women *are* different, and there's nothing wrong or sexist about making that an integral part of the gameplay and the storyline. But most developers are afraid to offend, or maybe some people are too easily offended, and so men and women have become mostly interchangeable in games, a consideration

Questions over whether the *Halo* Nation would rally behind a British girl were made moot by Jo Dark being neither British nor particularly girlish. A missed opportunity to buck the FPS trend of giving the weapons all the personality, without even an idle animation to brush that ill-advised fringe out of her eyes she's chiefly, briefly memorable for her nail polish (sadly not seen here)



like hair colour or costume. That needs to change." This is the minefield that makes designing games with female leads so hard: to work, they need to be sexy enough to please the publisher, but sufficiently unsexualised to please the censor; feminine enough to make the choice meaningful, but macho enough to perform the violent tasks that are still the staple of almost all story-based games. To see the scale of the problem, it's worth imagining exactly what *God Of War* with a girl would look like: if its lead was a freckled, sunburned fury seeking vengeance for the death of her child and the insanity of her warrior husband, would she be any less relentless and terrible in combat, any less single-minded in her pursuit? More tellingly, could she be aggressively sexual enough to commandeer a threesome with two subservient men, self-conscious cut-away during the act itself or no? Can you imagine a female character swaggering away from a spot of group sex with a big grin and a health boost? It may be easy to scoff at the stereotype of male characters being slow, strong and good with their fists and female characters being fast, weak and good with their minds, but it's almost impossible to imagine anyone pulling off a Mrs Kratos.

But if cultural expectations mean that game designers are circumscribed in terms of what



Despite the fact that the female star of the *Final Fantasy XIII* trailer did nothing a male star wouldn't – a somersault, some gunplay and a windswept pose – her presence still unsettled





"YOU'D HAVE TO GO PRETTY FAR TO PRESENT A FEMALE CHARACTER IN A WORSE LIGHT THAN WHAT'S BEEN THE NORM IN GAMES"

actions their female characters can do, the restrictions on how they look can be even more treacherous. Game fans – perhaps a little self-conscious of how their hobby is still perceived by many in the mainstream – are uniquely sensitive to suggestions of exploitation. Even something as demure as **E**163's *Heavenly Sword* cover can trigger letters of complaint about peddling pornography. How does a game designer tackle that weird double standard? The heroines of both Tørnquist's games spend scenes in their underwear – reasonably so, since *Dreamfall*'s Zoë begins the game in the unending, lazy morning of the university dropout – but it can't help risking a perception of exhibitionism rather than intimacy. "I think the second Zoë gets up and starts walking around, talking about her life, it stops being voyeurism and starts becoming reality – plain and simple. There's something so perfectly normal and yet utterly alien about introducing the lead character in a game in such a fashion, it was completely irresistible to me," responds Tørnquist. "So no, I've never had to self-censor when it comes to the presentation and use of female characters. After all, you'd have to go pretty far to present a female character in a worse light than what's been the norm in games."

The reverse problem plagues a game like *Red Ninja*. Reviled in many reviews for being sexist, its heroine, Kurenai, got as close to portraying a Mrs Kratos as games have ever risked. Fuelled by a fantastically savage vengeance, she sets out to avenge her butchered family with every means at her disposal, creating the infamous move in which



***God Of War*'s Kratos is the very definition of an action hero. But if the power of videogames is to make anything possible, why does it seem so preposterous to imagine his role given to a woman?**

she lures a guard round a corner with a flash of thigh before silently slicing their throats. What's interesting about the game's reception is that her actions and portrayal were twice as demure and twice as purposeful as the doe-eyed parade of pliable *Dead Or Alive* characters, but raised twice the objections.

And there's a rub. Lara may have made an unlikely, eerily geometric covergirl for The Face in 1997, but it took seven more years for female game characters to enter mainstream erotica in the pages of Playboy. To date, two Girls Of Gaming layouts have run in the magazine, although as a sign of either propriety or scarcity – and it's likely the latter – only two of the 16 featured characters have actually been the leads of their respective games. "There's something so powerfully absurd about the notion of a 3D modelled character



THE KICK INSIDE

Horror games have provided a reliable career opportunity for female leads – survival horror accounts for many of the starring roles given to women in Japanese developers' mainstream output – and yet for all the genre's homages, it's avoided the uniquely female dread that charged Rosemary's Baby or, conversely, Medea. *Silent Hill 3* comes close, with its heroine bearing an unwilling immaculate conception, but the body horror is never truly explored. Some of the bleakest moments in both *Siren* and its sequel (above) have resulted from a surrogate mother figure protecting an infant, but never an explicit mother-and-child under threat. As an opportunity for tension that's as deeply physical as it is psychological, it's curiously undervalued – and while there are complex emotions involved it can provide an immediate stab of fear as capably as splashes of gore or jump scares (witness Jade's orphans in peril during *Beyond Good & Evil*'s opening). It could be the industry still equates maternal instinct with wrapping up warm and staying safe indoors, the antithesis of high adventure; or maybe it's not yet able to express it with anything less gauche than a QTE labour.



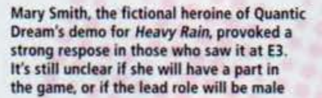


TRUE ROMANCE

In-game love affairs seldom go beyond a one-level stand, more concerned with physics than chemistry, and if female protagonists offer a vehicle for something deeper – and perhaps darker – the industry appears unready for the commitment. Infocom's swashbuckling romantic paperback *Plundered Hearts* managed to connect players with their inner flustered Englishwoman as a text adventure in 1987, but it's unlikely male players would be as comfortable 20 years on presented with a full 3D version. Still, there are moments of self-aware love among the ruins. *The Longest Journey* (above) finds April propositioned by a boorish fellow lodger with such cringeworthy lack of tact that he can only have experienced romance as an RPG dice roll, while *FFX-2* explores *FFX*'s unrequited love from the heroine's side – picking up not just after the hero, but after the love affair, with what comes close to wistful dignity. It's enough to make you wish that some of gaming's other convincing partnerships had split in such a fashion: *Prince Of Persia*'s dusky romance might not have met such a jarringly abrupt end if it had passed the story on to Farah during the Prince's second brush with puberty.







Mary Smith, the fictional heroine of Quantic Dream's demo for *Heavy Rain*, provoked a strong respose in those who saw it at E3. It's still unclear if she will have a part in the game, or if the lead role will be male

becoming someone's sexual fantasy. Good or bad, we've definitely opened a door there, and it's never, ever going to be closed again." Tørnquist says. "I guess it's a good thing and a step forward for the industry now that we have the tools, the technology and the ability to create a digital character so real that men lust after her. Whether it's a step forward for female videogame characters is a whole other issue – the male fantasy of the 'perfect' woman, recreated digitally, has been a problem for the industry, and posing our too-perfect puppets across a centrefold isn't going to help any." We ask if he would have given his blessing to either of the *TLG* heroines posing, to which he diplomatically reasons: "If it's something the character would have done, then no problem.



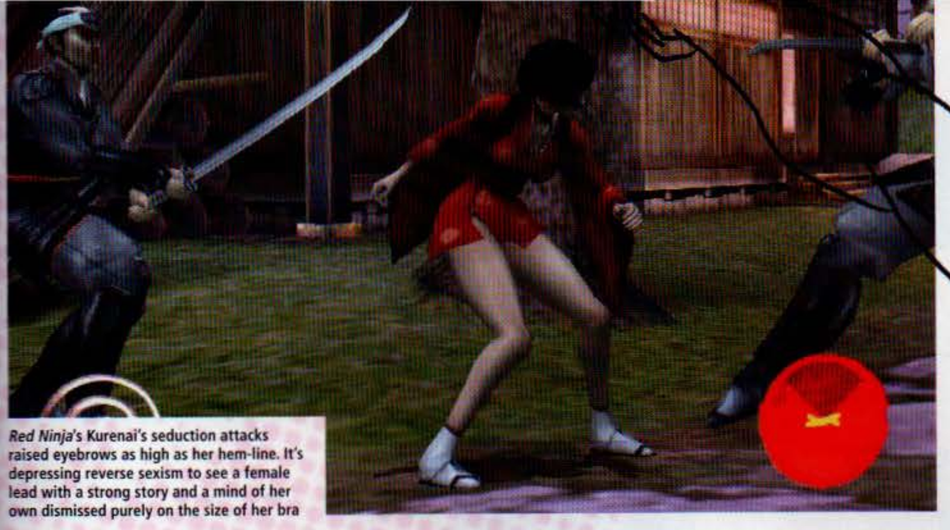
The reasons why *Beyond Good & Evil*'s original Jade – a wide-eyed Gallic ingenue in T-shirt and cargo pants to dethrone Betty Blue from student walls – was discarded are as obvious as the 'what if's they left behind. The early version's then-lead (above) suggests an afternoon dreamscape a world away from bo-staff duels and dogfights: perhaps too drowsy, too gently feminine

They're adults, and they make their own choices." For the record, though – modders take note – Apri no way, Zoe: perhaps, but the bikini stays on.

Of course, female representation isn't a problem unique to gaming: having written for screen as we as monitor, Tørnquist points out that on this issue, comparing games to Hollywood blockbusters is ap as they both have ballooning budgets to offset by appealing to as broad an audience as possible. "There's always a girl in there somewhere, but precious few movies have female characters as the *primary* leads. They've become stronger and more independent, but in the end they fall prey to stereotyping. Television is marginally better – Buffy The Vampire Slayer was a huge inspiration for Apri Ryan's character in *TLJ* – but even in shows like Lost, where you have several strong females, they often observe and follow rather than lead."

But even assuming able game designers can juggle all the expectations and preconceptions isn't the simple truth that the market just isn't interested? It's an idea that's become so commonplace that it's rarely questioned, and yet when looked at fresh it's an absurd proposition. It's hard not to hear an echo of the disbelieving exclamation that Alan Moore, arch-wizard of Britis comics, wrote in response to 2000AD readers' confused reception of his (extra-)ordinary girl epic Halo Jones: 'What's the matter? Don't you *like*





Red Ninja's Kurenai's seduction attacks raised eyebrows as high as her hem-line. It's depressing reverse sexism to see a female lead with a strong story and a mind of her own dismissed purely on the size of her bra

girls?' For Kristenson, the issue is the same: "Why would a predominantly male market prefer to play as a gruff sweaty man rather than a slender, beautiful girl like Nariko?" Tørnquist goes further: "I believe the issue is with developers, and even more so with publishers: a lot of developers don't know how to create female leads, and publishers are afraid to let them try. I don't think guys necessarily have a problem with playing female characters. Quite the opposite, I think a lot of us secretly – or not so secretly in my case – enjoy it. The excuse that I typically get from male gamers is 'If I'm going to be looking at someone's ass for the next 20 hours…' which I think is bullshit. We're all of us completely fascinated with women and with what makes them tick, and anything that'll help us understand them better, or at least allow us to peek inside their heads for a second, is something we jump at." Cage is even more ambitious in his intention to restore the gender balance: "If a part of the pleasure of playing games comes from being someone else, being a girl is a very interesting experience. Changing perspective questions our identity and our relationship to others, and there's probably a lot to learn about ourselves from being in someone else's shoes – playing characters who are victims of racism or sexism, for example, may allow us to better understand how they feel. Even if it is 'just a game'."

And, of course, the current drought of female-led games creates its own market imperatives. For

"CHANGING PERSPECTIVE QUESTIONS OUR IDENTITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS, THERE'S A LOT TO LEARN FROM BEING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES"



Ninja Theory, the advantages of crowning Nariko the queen of E3 were clear. "I think it has been massively advantageous," claims Kristensen. "How many male action leads did you see at E3 that you couldn't distinguish between? You look at Nariko's face and it tells a story. People love stories and they appreciate that they will get something from her. I think people have subconsciously been waiting for a new female lead."

But if they have been waiting, it isn't because there's a groundswell of support for the issue of gender emancipation. There may be long-term ideals that mean games should work towards greater equality, but there are short-term gains which make women one of game design's greatest untapped resources. Greater inclusion of women offers the chance to double the options open to gaming at a stroke, before even questioning any of the issues of attracting more women to game-playing and game-making. Better exploitation of women can suggest new game mechanics, introduce new characters and shape new stories. At a time when improvements in visual fidelity, animation techniques and AI sophistication mean that ignoring half the possibilities they offer is more foolish than ever, it could make the oncoming generation's walk through the shadow of the Uncanny Valley less of a lonely one.



KILLER QUEENS

Samus Aran remains near-unique among action heroines by actually dressing sensibly for a fight, but even with all Nintendo's nuance of humanistic characterisation, her gender was announced by springing from her power suit in a leotard and blonde bouffant. Interestingly, as the visual definition of her adventures has increased, so too has her alternate profile as a jumpsuited nymphette. By rights, *PN03*'s Vanessa should be the anti-poster girl for gender's irrelevance: director Shinji Mikami claimed the character's appearance was unimportant to him, and she was born a girl on an artist's whim. But the game would come to revolve around her haughty hip cant – and the gracelessly boyish assault rifle she wielded in the first preview was replaced by her strike-a-pose wardance.

"Lara's obvious, but should never be underestimated," feels Tornquist, "Here's a woman – rich, intelligent, beautiful, adventurous, athletic, cocky – who manages to be both feminine and powerful, and who's not simply a male action hero with boobs." Perhaps the Trouble With Lara has less to do with tank tops and cocktail dresses as it does with the players wedging the camera into her cleavage.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

MotoGP '06



Choose 'Legend' difficulty, Extreme 1200 Championship and just one lap per race. The result? A sparky, arcade-like tussle in the minute-long dash toward the finish line
360, CLIMAX

Makai Kingdom



The arrival of *Disgaea 2* justifies a return to *Makai* and its bizarre SRPG weapon set. Magnets, balloons, frying pans, drums – who needs *Dead Rising*, eh?
PS2, NIPPON ICHI

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



Horse armour aside, Bethesda's dripfeed of micropurchased quests provides some of the strongest and timeliest DLC support for a 360 game, next to *Kameo* and *PGR3*
360, BETHESDA

Tomorrow never knows

If Prey can do it, can Duke Nukem Forever?



Another troubled development, *Stalker*, has seen its share of design transformations since conception as a futuristic adventure. Its open world and RPG component are enduring draws, keeping fans interested and the project alive. But how does *Duke Nukem*'s stamina compare?

The history of *Prey* is replete with irony, to the point where almost anything you read on the subject has you chuckling. It's funny how reports of the first version outlined its desire to follow id's example of including modem support for an ambitious multiplayer mode. "A virtual movement that will take over the world," was how producer **Tom Hall** described this follow-up to *Terminal Velocity* and *Rise Of The Triad* in 1996.

Funnier still is how a game originally developed for Pentium 90 processors, set to devour eight megabytes of RAM and the two megabyte resources of an SVGA graphics card, could hit the shelves demanding the best from an Xbox 360 and still leave something over for owners of more powerful PCs.

Following a five-year media blackout – the 2000-2005 period in which the game was resurrected under Human Head Studios – the story has just concluded with its most remarkable irony of all: that a game conceived three years before the original *Half-Life* was released can still be capable of setting the FPS agenda. So how's this for a question: If *Prey* can escape from development hell to such high acclaim, then might the same be possible for *Duke Nukem Forever*?

Until we find out for certain why 3DR and Take Two have kept Duke on life support for so long (nine years and counting) it's hard to say. As we learned this month, *Prey* has been on to something special since the start, with a determined brief that even the bio-terrors of *Doom 3* and *Quake 4* failed to undermine. But does *DNF* have the same strong foundation?

In 1995, *Prey* had a goal of being innovative and intriguing, and specifically an FPS with a world so captivating you'd still want to play if its enemies were removed. And that's precisely what it has become. Though the technology has changed, the philosophy has kept it focused, and the results are magnificent.

Now what does *DNF* have? A trash-talking mouth? A natural habitat drowning in vice? Toilets that flush? Hardly future-proofed considering where games are today. But behind those physical qualities lays a mindset not unlike that of *Prey*: a desire to flex the FPS mould. So if the meat-head sexist hasn't lost his smarts, perhaps he might still have a chance.











Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





PREY

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £50 (360), £30 (PC) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: HUMAN HEAD STUDIOS (PC), VENOM GAMES (360 PORT) PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E160

Believing the notion of alien worlds in corridor shooters to be a fallacy, their environments unremarkable right down to the floors, walls and ceilings, *Prey's* assault on tradition begins with those foundations. Single battlefields wrapped and twisted into ornate puzzle-boxes, its chambers defy the genre's conventions

The wisdom of *Prey*, as passed from a grandfather to grandson, and from one development team to the next, is to remember where you're from. Tommy Hawk, the Cherokee garage mechanic and purpose-built franchise star, must bring the spirit powers of his ancestors to bear on inhuman abductors. Human Head Studios, meanwhile, the *Rune* developer that's spent five years refitting his crashed 1996 vehicle, must translate whatever appeal it had then into something relevant today. When that's your charge, self-knowing isn't just the best mentality to have: it's the only one.

That last decade has hurt 3D Realms, most tragically with the untimely death of William Scarboro, one of its earliest and most industrious programmers. But it hasn't hurt *Prey*, which has laboured rather than languished in development hell. The game's gravity and portal systems, once tied to a proprietary engine but now to *Doom 3*'s, have proved the game's pillars, upholding not just its sense of purpose, but its reason to exist at all. So rather than emerge as the forlorn child of done-when-it's-done rhetoric, *Prey* has come out fighting with all the desperate energy of a modern action hero, and all the satisfied ambition of a classic action adventure.

Experience has taught it valuable lessons that have seldom, during all its years, been expressed so coherently elsewhere. How to maintain challenge while eliminating toil, for example; when to leave players in the dark, both literally and figuratively; how to accentuate a foreign environment with suggestions of the familiar; how to lay a linear path of progress without incorporating dead space. Further achievements are as much a testament to simple hard graft, not least the tight design, dense arrangement and provident recycling of textures that gives the game's environment – a self-enclosed bio-metallic world called the Sphere – a prodigiously alien appearance that takes several playthroughs to wholly appreciate.

> Enemies choose ceilings for defensive positions, water drips sideways, corpses fall to where gravity demands and ladders simply don't exist

As much an anthology of hi-sheen sci-fi concept as it is of FPS craft, *Prey* would just as happily bear a Hugo Award on its mantelpiece as an **Edge** one. What begins as an Event Horizon-inspired meat grinder (and its debt is considerable) passes its halfway point as if through an airlock, floating out among the shifting shadows of space hulks, asteroids and other assorted trappings of Robert Heinlein dust jackets. As the adventure turns from abduction into escape and retaliation, its architecture transforms you from an oversized clot in the Sphere's intestines to a speck of space dust slave to conflicting gravities. And *Prey* has strong words to say on that particular subject.

Crucially, its gravity switches and walkways are game mechanics first, visual phenomena second. They convert the novelty of their functions – flipping rooms on their axes and walking on walls – into functioning tests of navigation, spatial awareness, base dexterity and logic.

Downplaying such tricks would critically understate the potential of *Prey's* concept or the breadth of its implementation. While most shooters handle the genre's design tradition like fragile cargo, careful to ensure that its arrangement of pieces doesn't fall into disarray, *Prey* cranks it like a Rubik's cube, cocking its world delightfully askew. Enemies choose the walls and ceilings for their defensive positions, water drips sideways, corpses fall to where gravity demands and ladders simply don't exist.

And despite offering a mind-boggling gamut of such psyche-outs, *Prey* remains navigable. It cascades you like a loose screw through the anatomy of a great machine, thanks largely to its second design pillar, a network of connecting portals that simply shrugs off a decade of linear navigation and enemy placement issues like a bad dream. Gone is the Billy Jean video of trigger tiles and pickups that marred *Doom 3*, replaced by a transparent matrix of spawn points and doorways that often serve both purposes at



Luminosity is the game's fourth primary colour, and it religiously forsakes midrange brightness for extremes, casting impenetrable shadows which it pinpricks and dissects with gilt-edged shafts of light. It's a striking yet fragile aesthetic, and display calibration is crucial



Bolstered by alternately wistful, brooding and thunderous music cues (*Halo almost* has it this good), the scenarios and set-pieces express a commendable realisation: that gamers, like movie audiences, don't like to be sold the same old moment time and time again until the credits

Deathmatch from above

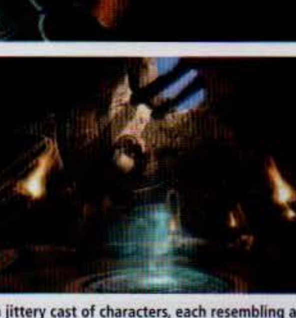


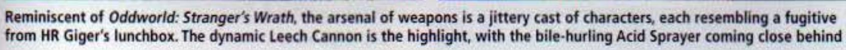
Consider Multiprey, once the game's focus and now its self-professed novelty, as an experiment – and its results are yours to play with. This should embarrass a few of its contemporaries (though not the one in which you can fire toilets at each other), because it brings more fizz to the tired deathmatch formula than anyone else has dared. It presents few maps, but themes each so as to capture a specific look or mechanism from the singleplayer game. Most thrilling is without question Switch Gravity, which features not only trigger pads that collapse everyone to a specified surface, but force-fields that isolate such effects to specific rooms, allowing you to toy with your opponents from safety.

Bewilderment is the most consistent response to *Prey's* world. Abducted human cattle are overwhelmed by the machines used to mash them into chow, gibbering escapees claw at the walls, and the sentient hostility of early environments shepherds the player onwards









Reminiscent of *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*, the arsenal of weapons is a jittery cast of characters, each resembling a fugitive from HR Giger's lunchbox. The dynamic Leech Cannon is the highlight, with the bile-hurling Acid Sprayer coming close behind



once. Relieved of their accursed duties as stepping stones and treasure chests, the game's crates often conceal tunnels into distant rooms, while its more conspicuous portals seldom fail to drop you somewhere far to the leftfield of where you anticipated. The next corner in *Prey* has the capacity to lead anywhere, and the game revels in that freedom from beginning to end.

But not everyone will step wholeheartedly into its universe, and expectations born of other shooters won't last long in its atmosphere. Like an amusement ride, which is what it is throughout, it proceeds as if on a strict clock, seldom confronting the player with significant challenges. Much of this is due to its ingenious elimination of repeat journeys, and the sidelining of quicksaves via an extra-dimensional recuperative shootout, the game bringing play to a halt when you die, but never reversing progress. Its puzzles, however, which remain abstract in their requirement of out-of-body journeys through force-fields and over chasms, can become predictable. The AI of its sometimes generic foes, similarly, presents little resistance beyond twitch dodges and multiple fire modes, making combat the game's most divisive element despite its intriguing organic arsenal of weapons.

Its story would also be twice as poignant were its actors not caked in gore and schooled exclusively in melodrama. But – and this is a big but – *Prey's* ill-assigned air of profundity is its unlikeliest of assets, the final elusive component of a mountainous B-movie experience. It begs the question of what to champion in a videogame – the classic brilliance that satisfies the mind or the sometimes guilty pleasures that leave their players' hands goosebumped. Last month we recognised *Half-Life 2: Episode One* as a sophisticate of the former, but *Prey's* unconstrained grandeur and sharp wits are every bit as profound. As escapes into nightmares go, it's out of this world. **[8]**



Ponderous and majestic, like gaming's answer to Star Trek: The Motion Picture, *Prey* strikes its chosen chord in later stages as precisely as it does elsewhere. There's occasional friction between engine and desired aesthetic, but the overall result is ceaselessly captivating

ULTIMATE GHOSTS 'N' GOBLINS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,980, £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), SEPTEMBER (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E163, E165



Arthur's double jump isn't just used to stretch the distance between elements of the game. It's often needed to dip down between platforms, before instantly bouncing out again, having claimed your dangling prize



Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins' most powerful spells aren't cast by a gallant knight upon demons or by mischievous wizards on a gallant soon-to-be washer-woman, chicken or grasshopper. This great game instead casts them directly upon its players, those who have longed for such a dedicated, energetic and above all successful display of PSP witchcraft since the machine's release. There are two illusions that seduce during your first minutes with the game. The first suggests a sprite-based authenticity: intricately caricatured worlds, furnished with pixel-art precision and vibrant with the bold palette required by the limitations of the 16bit era. The second transports you back to 1985, when *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* first strode into arcades a strict, smart and efficient platformer – to a time when games were



Paper can't do justice to the vibrancy of *Ultimate*. The brightness of the PSP screen means it crackles with colour and light, the richness of the palette perfectly supporting the dense detail of the nightmarish worlds

uncluttered, breezy and brutally unforgiving. After 20 years of waiting for those colours and that gameplay to be replicated, it only takes a few hours with *Ultimate* to dispel the illusion that this is the game to return them to favour. This is far, far more than a nostalgic return to form – instead, it's a game so adept at exploiting its own heritage that it can integrate thorough modernity into its design without denting its retro appeal in the slightest.

> It's a game so adept at exploiting its own heritage that it can integrate modernity into its design without denting its retro appeal in the slightest

Ultimate wants to be what its name suggests, the be-all and end-all of *Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, and it achieves it by exploring every nook and cranny of its design, auditioning every conceivable mechanism for guiding Arthur from platform A to platform B and identifying the technology that can perfectly execute the results. The most surprising result is that this technology is the PSP which, despite the best efforts of *Lumines*, *Ridge Racers* and *Wipeout Pure*, has barely known what it's like to be essential – until now. Watching *Ultimate* re-tool itself to fit its capabilities – stretching out the playfield to find new platforming dynamics from the widescreen display; daring an extraordinary palette to make the most of the intense luminosity of the screen; slicing and dicing its linear structure to make sure that replayability takes second place to continued playability – is as much a masterclass in hardware deconstruction as it is in software design.

But it's also a masterclass in game theory.



Arthur's isn't the only familiar face in *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins*. The game's design is far too broad to be called linear, but that doesn't mean a rejection of the final boss-battle crescendo which old-school players hold so dear







Although the game's platform arrangement means facing the traditional challenge of pacing and precision you'd expect, returning when powered-up for flight completely changes the framework and impact of the level design



It's an active demonstration of the fact that its developers have an ultimate knowledge of platform games, and that means they also have an ultimate knowledge of platform gamers and their behaviour, tactics and approach. As a result, the game is unparalleled in terms of being able to second-guess the player: every element is perfectly aligned – ledges with floors, mistakes with consequences and problems with solutions. It's a seamless construction: no matter what you do – what mistake you make or what lazy shortcut you think you've spotted – the game has something waiting to torment you. Its heart lies in the old era of gaming where games were, from start to finish, better than their players. It's a million miles away from cruel, crude torture-chamber platformers that think a hundred untimely deaths equal a hundred times the longevity. In *Ultimate*, dying isn't proof of the designers' callousness, but instead their care: a lovingly planned, elaborately illustrated clockwork toy of death, pain and poisoning.

But it's only after completing the game for the first time that you discover what makes this not just a very fine *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* but the ultimate *Ghosts 'n' Goblins*. By exploding its own structure through warp gates which take you back and forth through the levels, and subverting its own mechanics by providing power-ups which substantially change the way you play, what looked at first like levels designed with rigid precision become flexible, malleable playgrounds. A prime example is when you gain the ability to fly, courtesy of a special shield and winged suit of armour, which almost turns the game into a free-scrolling shooter: suddenly all the platforms change to become obstacles and all the enemies become aerial targets. And other elements of the structure adapt when you replay a stage – bosses don't necessarily appear, so major milestones vanish – creating an experience that is better paced to suit the way your abilities allow you to move through it. The game recasts itself, re-calibrating earlier levels to address the balance that your more evolved powers have disrupted.

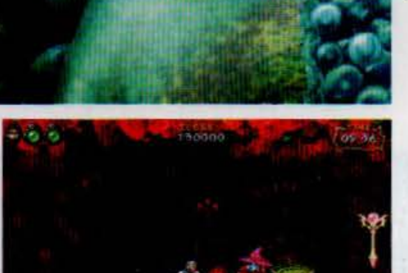


As ever the greatest enemy isn't necessary those out to skewer you. It can often be Arthur himself, especially after a wizard has turned him into a weakened chicken, grasshopper, or particularly astonished-looking butterfly





Although the game's opening levels seem to offer traditional *G 'n' G* settings, the game soon catapults you into unimaginable environments where death lurks everywhere



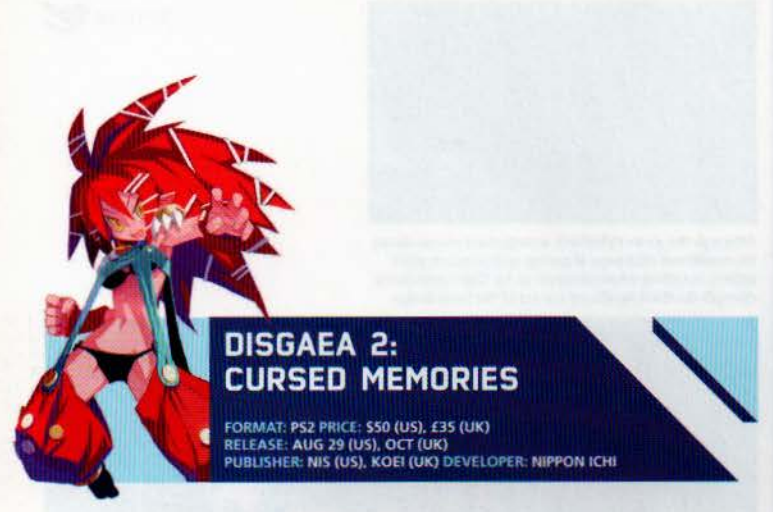
Later levels ripple with organic excess, showing the kind of free-wheeling level design last seen in *Gradius V* – another of the unexpected parallels between this classical platformer and scrolling shooter sensibilities

Under normal circumstances, playing a game like *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins* is gradually demoralising, as each new ability and each new level gradually depletes the finite store you know the game contains: each reward received means one less reward yet to be won. But *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins'* intricacy and malleability means there's no way to gauge what subtleties and surprises are left in store. Ultimate is a word which is usually the hallmark of empty hyperbole: here, it's a statement of fact. **[9]**

Arthur's allotment



To coincide with the game's release in Japan, Capcom put out an absurdly charming short film chronicling Arthur's life since his early gaming triumphs. Retired to domestic bliss, he spends his days ironing his boxer shorts, getting drunk in karaoke bars and eating ice creams in the park – all paid for from his treasure chest of jewels. The easy life has meant he's grown churlish about his heroic calling, but the new game is about to change all that. Watch for yourselves at www.makai.com



DISGAEA 2: CURSED MEMORIES

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (US), £35 (UK)
RELEASE: AUG 29 (US), OCT (UK)
PUBLISHER: NIS (US), KOEI (UK) DEVELOPER: NIPPON ICHI



The European releases of Nippon Ichi's strategy games have lacked the optional Japanese voice track often available in the US. *Disgaea 2*, however, is confirmed to feature the original dialogue, from cutscenes to the incidental battle cries

It's good to be back in the world of *Disgaea*, which is somewhat surprising. It's surprising because the pair of strategy RPG games that emerged in the wake of the original *Disgaea* – *Phantom Brave* and *Makai Kingdom*, a muddle and a superior progression, respectively – are built on a near-identical foundation. Some kind of Nippon Ichi aversion sickness should have set in by now, really. But it's almost a relief to step away from the ever-increasing circles of *Makai Kingdom*'s disc-based movement/combat system, and to return to a more traditional grid setup, not to mention a game framework that feels more focused next to *Makai*'s freewheeling possibilities.

Which doesn't mean that *Disgaea 2* hasn't stolen other useful elements. The levelling system is now more rounded, since experience is gained via a number of actions in battle instead of being concerned solely with kills. The result is that healers and other buff-casting specialists don't need to be babysat and handled with kid gloves in order to coax them into levelling up. It's even quite likely that such former-weaklings will overtake the rest of your ten-strong squad of characters in terms of experience, which is a relief rather than any kind of imbalance.



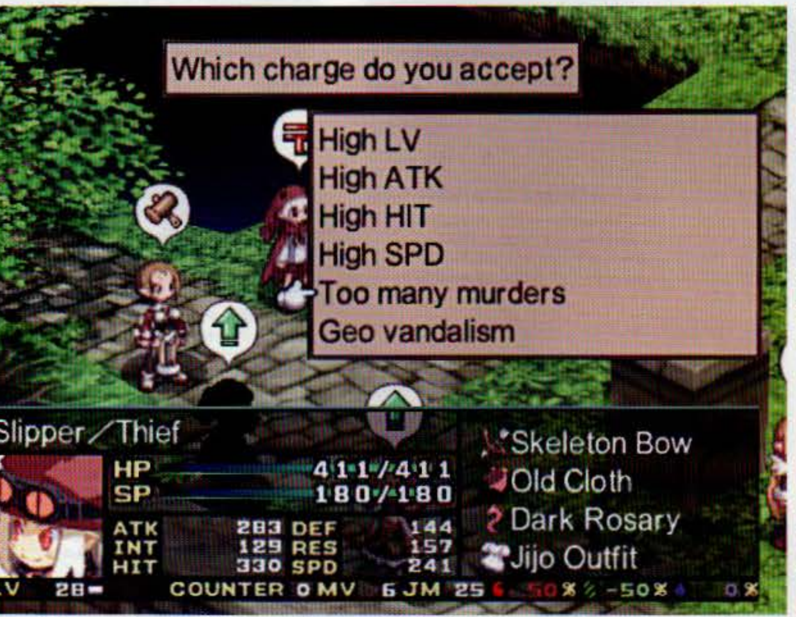
As a simplistic but much appreciated treat, treasure chests spawn around the hub between stages. As with *Disgaea* and *Phantom Brave*, there's more to the hub than at first meets the eye, with *Disgaea 2*'s HQ concealing a considerable secret

The Item World – a dungeon crawl where the player can enter any piece of equipment in their inventory in order to improve its ratings – has received the lion's share of neat new touches, sprucing it up agreeably. Each Item Dungeon is now littered with a variety of mystery rooms – makeshift towns, rare merchants, fortune tellers and more – along with a treasure hunt involving the pirates who gatecrash the occasional stage, dropping in off the back of a flying log. The Dark Assembly – a courtroom where motions for new character classes or improved shop rosters are passed or vetoed – has expanded, allowing the player to become part of the Assembly itself, along with the appearance of legendary senators and a subpoena system that introduces criminal records for characters.



> Its main story stars an irresistible range of weirdoes and a madcap script that toys with all manner of self-referencing and perversion

All such expansion is welcome, of course, and fits snugly around *Disgaea*'s core, but there's a problem – that aforementioned familiarity can just as easily breed contempt when certain issues haven't been resolved. The inventory is still in need of better organisation, with regards to letting the player categorise their collections of equipment instead of being lumped with a small item bag, a spacious warehouse and nothing in between. The camera, which can only be cycled between one of four isometric perspectives (as well as zoomed out slightly), can easily irritate thanks to the undulating layouts of Item World levels, and the cursor







With its world populated by demons, it's no surprise to find that *Disgaea 2* contains a justice system that rewards bad behaviour and counts good RPG tactics, or even your character's existence, as criminal acts. Any player who decides to accept a subpoena can go before a court, to be given a neat gift along with a criminal record





Incidental team-up attacks are more vicious this time, while stacking characters into a tower of bodies turns them into a unit capable of performing the ultimate co-op manoeuvre, with each combatant dealing a hit to the juggled enemy











Adell and Rozalin, the game's main characters, aren't as demented a duo as Laharl and Etna. Rozalin's servant – Tink the 'dirty frog' – more than makes up for it, with a split personality that turns him into a maniacal sex pest

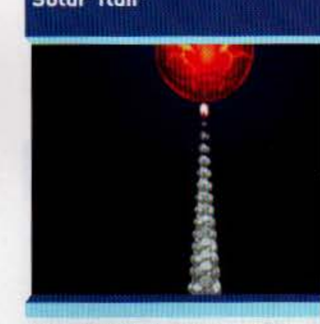
movement over the topography of such stages can feel just as finicky. Also, the 'Specialist' residents of the Item World – NPCs that can be subdued in order to greatly improve some specific attributes of the item they inhabit – aren't handled well in terms of explaining the effects that each produces. It's a problem that was tackled more capably – if not perfectly – by the original *Disgaea*. Granted, it's not as if followers of Nippon Ichi games aren't well versed in the application of patience, but such niggles are beginning to grate. There are only so many times you can be drawn in by the endless stat-farming possibilities on offer, before those foibles cause the idea to lose suction.

Disgaea best expressed the kind of depth and customisation that the studio's earlier strategy RPG games were tending towards, a torch-bearing turn-based experience where pretty much every stat could be manipulated or modified in some way. It was an SRPG that attempted to swallow all SRPGs before it, by handing near-limitless power over to the player as long as they were willing to work for it. *Disgaea 2* isn't blazing such a trail – although you have to wonder if such a thing is even possible – it's a firm and lively sequel to an extremely enjoyable game, but also one that feels in need of tightening to smooth out the experience. If nothing else, it would allow more than just the most bloody-minded or stat-fancying of gamers to reap its riches.

It's a whole that still offers an intricate series of diversions – some old, some new – but one that has lost some sparkle, despite its sharper, more colourful looks. Most players will get sick of *Disgaea 2* long before *Disgaea 2* gets sick of them, and it remains a game in which you're ultimately encouraged to become a god, but never left feeling stuck in a rut without some opportunity to improve your team of characters. And, of course, its main story stars an irresistible range of weirdoes and a madcap script that toys with all manner of self-referencing, bizarreness and perversion.

It's easy to believe there's life left in *Disgaea*, that it's a franchise that must dizzy its creators with as many opportunities for tweaking and growth as it does those who play it. But it's hard not to believe that the appearance of experimental spin-offs *Phantom Brave* and *Makai Kingdom* in between both *Disgaea*s didn't help change the sequel for the better. But wherever *Disgaea* decides to go next – PSP, PS3, wherever – Nippon Ichi definitely has its work cut out. **[7]**

Solar flair



One of *Disgaea 2*'s many secret lands is the Shadow World, a dark twin to the game's main quest, where each stage is unlocked by meeting certain conditions in the latter. As well as bulked-up opponents, these arenas are spiked with a new and quite toxic ingredient – the Dark Sun, a malevolent ball of fire in the sky that wreaks havoc as and when it likes. The player can see what the Dark Sun's next moves will be over the next few turns – which include such disruptions as reviving all slain enemies or declaring game over. The only way to scupper it is through sacrificing members of your team, flinging enough of them into the Dark Sun to destroy it.



Once famous landmarks, like Grauman's Chinese Theater, appear, the game takes on a new resonance. Especially for those who spent the morning queuing up outside for Microsoft's E3 keynote earlier this year



The game's overall challenge comes from managing the threat rating. Putting out fires, bandaging people and killing drug dealers lowers it, but spraying civilians with bullets produces a swift – and fatal – government response







A series of selectable sidekicks smoothes your progress through the game. Laudably ignorable, they trot along behind, solving the unpredictable spawn point and poor damage indication problems by watching your back

BAD DAY LA

FORMAT: PC (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: $30
RELEASE: Q3 2006 (US) TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: ENLIGHT
DEVELOPER: MAURITANIA IMPORT/EXPORT CO PREVIOUSLY IN: E158

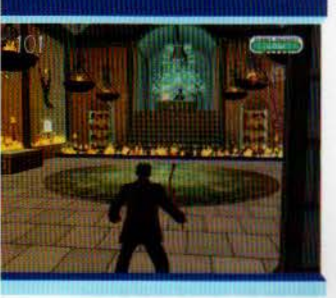
The hook is as strong as ever: every imaginable disaster is visited, in turn, on LA over the course of one awful day. Hour after hour, a series of train wrecks, plane crashes, rogue superheroes, earthquakes, chemical attacks and terrorist outrages slam into a city already distracted by its day-to-day concerns of race riots, drug dealing and petty larceny. Taking the role of a homeless smart-ass, more interested in self-preservation than saving the day, you roam the city trying to keep a lid on the spiralling situation: shooting a terrorist there, bandaging an injured child here.

It's as inventive a set-up for a game as any full-blown fantasy, and it's brought to life by the inspired decision to have art duo Kozyndan set the visual tone. The cartoon stylings deliver a solidity and an authenticity which would have been entirely lacking in a photorealistic attempt to portray the city.

But the involvement of Kozyndan was also a savvy decision, because it's abundantly clear that American McGee's company was in over its head. The chunkiness of their art style means that LA can be depicted with a low-resolution simplicity which would be painful in a conventionally-presented game. And elsewhere there are other failings: the code itself feels fragile, and it's easy to trigger minor, but vexing bugs. The thirdperson action which forms the core of the game – shooting, healing and fixing are all just a case of selecting the right item, pointing the cross hairs and squirting – feels woolly and indistinct. Collision detection is unpredictable, and death can come without any real warning and sometimes without observable cause. Although the music choice throughout is excellent, the voice acting is entirely amateur in a way not heard since it was routine to bundle the tea lady into a spare cupboard and hope for the best. It badly lets down a script which would otherwise have some real sparkle and – still depressingly rare in games – some real satirical bite.

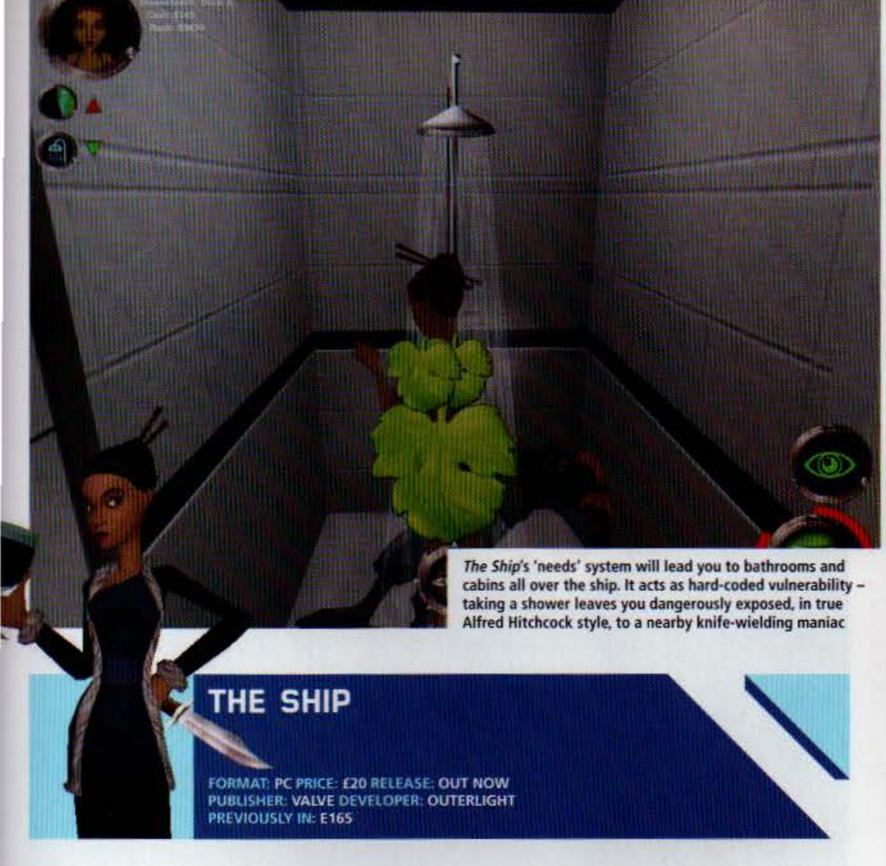
It's a great shame, because *Bad Day LA* is still a tremendously likeable game. The real-world setting is used to great effect – as the bland suburbs give way to recognisable landmarks, the sense of getting to really mess around somewhere you know is captured far better than the sterility of *True Crime*, *The Getaway* or *Project Gotham* ever offered. And the structure, where each story event adds new gameplay elements – earthquakes add platforms, terrorists add combat, plane crashes add fires – gives an irresistible impetus and a natural difficulty curve to what would otherwise be a rather plain gaming experience. In the end, *Bad Day LA* is the game people often say they want and then ignore when it arrives: it prizes ambition over execution and flair over finesse and both pays the price and reaps the rewards for daring to do so. **[4]**

Battling the boss



McGee is on record as saying that he wants *Bad Day LA* to be as accessible as possible, rightly believing that its style and subject matter have a wider appeal than more typical videogames. While there's no doubt the game's easier difficulty settings soften the challenge, the inclusion of bosses means a return to circle-strafing and weakness-spotting that can be alienating to wearied games veterans and confused newcomers alike.

Some of the least successful elements are the old bogeys of escort missions and on-rails episodes, like this machine gun handily tucked in the back of an ambulance. While both are typically inelegant, the game does an unusually good job of providing pacing and variety within its fairly simple framework, both in terms of story and gameplay



The Ship's 'needs' system will lead you to bathrooms and cabins all over the ship. It acts as hard-coded vulnerability – taking a shower leaves you dangerously exposed, in true Alfred Hitchcock style, to a nearby knife-wielding maniac

THE SHIP

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VALVE DEVELOPER: OUTERLIGHT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E165

It has perhaps become inevitable that gamers are expecting independent developers using Steam to match the stellar presentation standards of Valve's own games. Accordingly *The Ship* – the surreal deathmatch game available from Valve's download service – serves up delight and frustration in equal measure.

Delight first: the subject matter is ludicrously offbeat, an electronic version of Killer. You play one of up to 16 guests aboard a cruise liner, invited on board by a mysterious Mr X. He's offering a bounty for artful murder – kill the guest he demands and he'll grant extravagant prizes. But there's a price on your head too – and with the guests dying off one by one, you're probably doomed. Probably.

Frustration: this is a multiplayer game, and depends almost entirely on everyone else who's playing accepting and understanding the rules. If they don't, then *they* tire of the game's arcane traditions, pick up the nearest hatchet, and run amok. Funny for them; desperately annoying for everyone else.

Back to delight. While you're plotting murder, and stalking prey, you'll need to top up specific 'needs'. Like *The Sims*, each character needs to eat, drink, socialise, take a shower and use the lavatory. Fulfilling these needs means exploring the ship – and while you're out, why not spend some of your bounty on a new haircut, hat and spectacles? It's silly, engaging and highly entertaining.

But it's let down by an interface that needs a desperate rethink. The game occasionally requires quick reactions: whipping a fire axe off the wall to thwack a target in the back of the head, or pull out a pistol and pop a few shots off at an aggressor. Getting in the way of that instinctual violence are inventory screens, a desperate shortage of hot-keys and an excessive requirement for mouse-clicks. Dying because you pulled out an umbrella rather than a pistol is maddening.

Disguises, including a top hat, monocle, glasses (such as those pictured below) or even a whole new outfit can be used to distract your foes – just turn a corner, change your appearance and saunter on. Holding your nerve and walking away without turning around, all the while knowing that your hunter has lost track of you, is a remarkable, proud moment





Poisons are a problem – they'll kill you slowly unless you can reach the ship's medical facility in time. Dropping dead in front of the nurse (above) is a sad, but frequently hilarious, way to go





Before killing, players must identify their prey by walking up to them and pressing the use key. In crowds, this is no less than terrifying – everyone is a potential assassin laying in wait

And yet *The Ship* is still quietly charming. There are the elements here for a spectacular game. Certain areas of the ship are covered by security cameras and guards. These are 'nearly' safe areas – nearly because the guards can be bribed to look the other way. Or, in moments of extreme danger, you can whip out a gun and be deliberately sent to the brig. That might offer a brief moment of safety – but beware your assassin waiting outside the doors.

Again though, there is a communication problem. The underlying system for determining who and what is watching you feels indeterminate and almost random. Bludgeon an octogenarian to death in the casino one minute, and you might get away with it. Fend off a sword-wielding attacker with a baseball bat, and you might end up in front of the courts, given a hefty fine and released at the bottom of the league tables.

These are all issues that can and will be resolved: Outerlight will patch out the inconsistencies and interface issues, and the community around it will settle. The final delight: this game will get better. The last frustration: we're being made to wait.

[6]

Titanic art



***The Ship*'s look is a quirky, funny and thoroughly entertaining one. Character models are cartoon Agatha Christie – all monocles, top hats and feather boas, with harsh edges and overt jaw-lines. The ships themselves are decked in luxurious felt and leather – you can practically feel the baize on the pool tables. But there are graphical bugs: wash your hands and they'll stay dripping for the duration of the round.**



METAL SLUG 3D

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£32)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SNK PLAYMORE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

A rifle death



In line with some unwritten law of 3D gaming, *Metal Slug* offers a sniper rifle with scope and zoom-capable view. It's a failure not so much due to its token nature, but because it nestles awfully into the player's arsenal. When cycling through weapons while locked on, arriving at the sniper rifle instantly switches to a firstperson perspective, meaning the player either has to ease off for a second, or learn to avoid it completely when gun-swapping. Also, the scoped view inherits the player's thirdperson camera convention, a bewildering touch given the insufficient thirdperson camera options.

It's hard not to be cynical, not when *Metal Slug* is one of the few remaining 2D franchises that are healthy enough to produce regular offspring. Trading pixels for polygons in the shift to 3D, an exchange in which personality and focus is easily lost, is a dangerous move, whether it's the tenth anniversary for SNK's scrolling shooter hoot or not.

And yes, plenty of charm has been lost in translation, with 3D *Metal Slug* offering a stark and somewhat generic contrast to the dense canvas of character that used to ooze across the screen. It's not a total void – the hook-nosed faux-Nazi enemies are captured almost perfectly, swastika-parody emblem and all, while the chance to catch groups of them unawares can still raise a smile.

It's not without faithful spirit, either, offering a thirdperson shooter experience where vanilla troops take just a single shot to neutralise, and the lock-on reticule is hungry for new targets, switching at speed and bringing the action to the fullest of flows. But that only applies to what's onscreen, with the jerky camera system able to break that flow all too easily as offscreen targets are sought. The more powerful weapons (including the sniper gun – see 'A rifle death') need to be aimed manually, another mid-fracas switch in pace that's neither welcome nor well executed, and helps make the less trivial boss confrontations feel frustrating. And the small handful of on-rails vehicle stages in the sky and under the sea feel like an all-too-plainly realised obligation.

In its finer moments, it feels like a more straightforward distant cousin of a game that has had a superior transition from a flat to full-fat game world: *Battalion Wars*. Throughout those bubbles of top-speed gunning and running, *Metal Slug* feels fresh in its simplicity, compensating moderately well for the lack of a second player and providing the sole high points. The rest of it smacks of budget execution, from poor camera options to some dreary settings that struggle to feel lively even as the trademark zombies start lumbering and puking.

As a first draft, it's a glimpse of something special waiting to happen, of a no-nonsense attitude towards combat that could be developed into a series worthy of the torch that it has chosen to bear. It's something that may seem like a tinpot product for the series' tin anniversary, but one that holds some promise of good times perhaps to come. Or not – the game has arrived seemingly too late in the PS2's lifespan for it to be cultivated there, and the idea of such a game being asked to move into the visually rich and expensive demands of a next-gen console seems like a whole new risk for this fledgling 3D production. **[5]**



***Metal Slug* embraces a modern-day framework, offering upgrades and stat-boosting medals for each character. It's a shame the vehicles aren't more gratifying, as the game dedicates its biggest garage corner to customising them**



There are two handling setups for the ground vehicles, but neither offers a satisfying sense of movement. They need to be manoeuvred instead of just steamrollered through the enemy, so they're difficult to use where they're needed most





Brightly coloured bars of 'gold' are scattered throughout each stage, some hidden and some used as a paper trail to guide the player to the next area. It's a platforming aspect that's as banal as it sounds, and isn't used as a score element but simply for character skill upgrades and new vehicle weapons





For importers, the Japanese release offers all its cutscenes and menu options in English, and despite its brevity each of the four characters gives a different take the stages



TEKKEN: DARK RESURRECTION

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), SEPTEMBER 8 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

What do you do when innovation fails? If *Tekken 5* is any indicator, you bury the results alive under 50 tons of concrete and neon. And now, *Dark Resurrection* has another 50 tons. From the moment that Heihachi Mishima thrusts upwards from his grave, *Tekken 4* is a distant memory as the series shows a sky-clawing determination to stick with its traditions of excess, wherever they take it.

And that, for the moment, is a handheld – although Japanese sentiments make it clear that the PSP needs *Tekken* a lot more than *Tekken* needs the PSP. How much use it will prove is a difficult question, with the platform suffering not from a lack of quality titles but the perception of such a lack. What isn't in doubt is that squeezing an arcade game into a smaller box has yielded good results. While textures are simpler, and the control system is modified, this is still *Tekken* in all its demented exuberance.

Fears about controls prove unfounded: the transition to the PSP's D-pad requires some getting used to, but the old combos are still there for the taking. Elsewhere, the ratio change from 4:3 to 16:9 has delicately skewed the look of the game – a shift, if anything, for the better. The background is constricted, but the characters are much larger: the result is a more intimate brawl. Moving at 60fps during battles (but only 30fps for in-game cutscenes), the title shows the kind of performances that can be wrenched from the PSP now that its second generation of games is well and truly here.



Tekken's once-controversial control system, with each button matched to a limb, continues to allow for combos that are intuitive rather than feats of memory, and affords the same pleasure of experimentation and refinement

Those familiar with *Tekken 5* will find little new, though. *T:DR* remains a remix rather than a sequel: besides a few recastings of the earlier game's settings, two new characters and a little balancing of certain moves, the story mode is identical. Additions are generous but slightly inconsequential, taking the form of minigames (including a return for the lukewarm Tekken Bowling), game-sharing, ghosts and Tekken Dojo, a series of league and tournament battles.

Despite its tested formula, it's hard to shake the nagging feeling that *Tekken* now finds itself in a somewhat unhappy position. Bruised by past failures, the series is so tightly hemmed in by its own history – and the demands of fans – that it is largely unable to innovate. As such, the PSP version, while a solid iteration of an eminently playable formula, is able to grow only in width rather than concept. There will always be a place for quality like this, but there's no escaping the fact that what was a pleasant surprise in *Tekken 5* is now merely pleasant. **[7]**





As ever, the easy settings have a few short, sharp spikes, but on the harder level the challenge becomes brutal, with one mistake dragging you under for the rest of the match

In a move that's divided audiences, 34 characters are now available from the very outset, leaving the minigames and some additional distractions to act as unlockable rewards for progress in the story mode

Ghostworld



Rather than providing actual online battles, *Dark Resurrection* makes sound use of player ghosts. Having learned to mimic your fighting style, these can be uploaded and shared with other players. Namco is also releasing special ghost packs to download, to simulate the effect of playing different opponents in the arcade. Uploading ghosts seems to be a somewhat tricky procedure at the moment, and playing against a simulation of other players isn't that different from normal CPU encounters, but it's another indication of *Tekken's* inherent generosity.



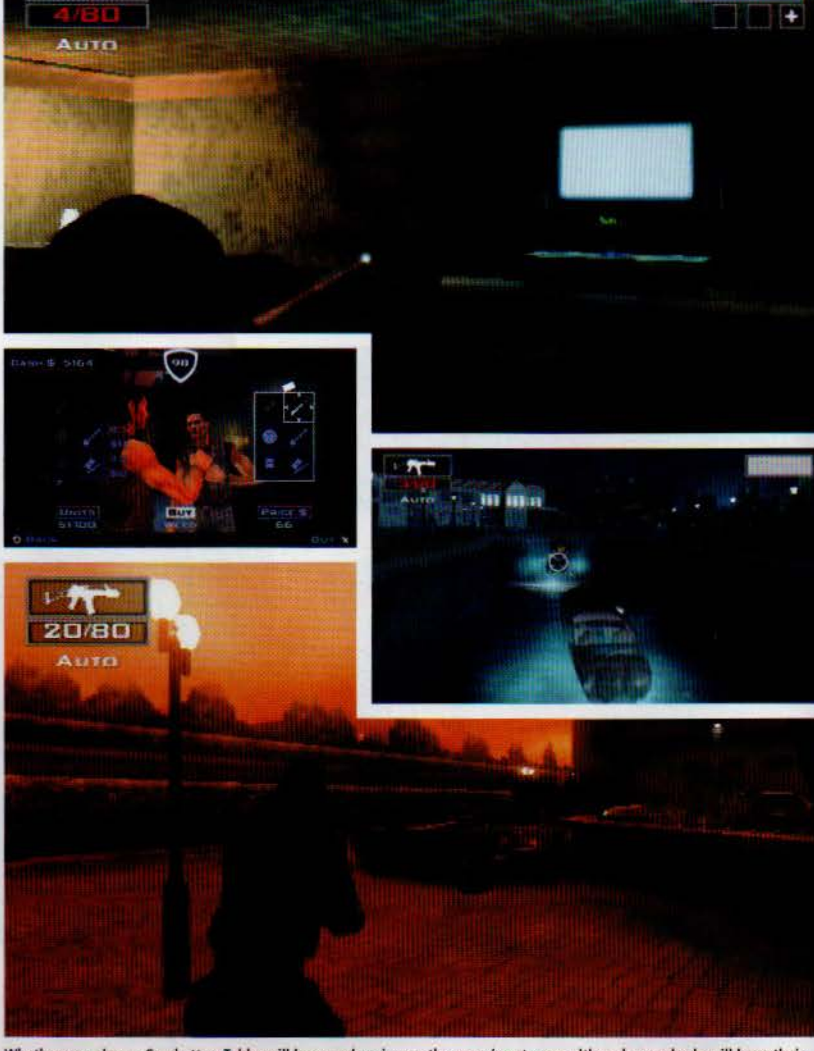
The PSP's face buttons have always felt slightly delicate, as has the machine itself. Both, however, seem more than able to withstand the inevitable bashing they'll receive during prolonged play on *Dark Resurrection's* harder settings





MIAMI VICE: THE GAME

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: REBELLION PREVIOUSLY IN: E165



Whether you play as Crockett or Tubbs will have no bearing on the game's outcome, although everybody will have their favourite. While the character models aren't as well realised as many on the PSP, they're animated with '80s cop TV flair

Miami style

Playing it straight for most of the game, *Miami Vice*'s heavy sartorial emphasis finds its creative outlet through the Reputation system. Various suits available affect the Reputation points scored from completing a level. While body armour may be practical, it broadcasts the fact that, deep down, you're afraid of getting shot, and hence will add nothing to your score. A beige suit with a T-shirt underneath, however, carries a hefty bonus. High reputation ratings allow access to more drug dealers, and larger scores.

Miami Vice touches down on the PSP in a manner that's laudably post-ironic, given the sheer amount of stone-washed baggage the licence brings with it. There's no question that the game itself has benefited from this relative seriousness, as well as Rebellion's effort in playing to the PSP's strengths, and the result is a surprisingly challenging title with a fair number of ideas, both borrowed and new.

Rather than providing simple run-and-gun action, the title opts for a more measured approach. Breaking each level up into a series of rooms, events proceed as a series of staccato bursts, moving from one gunfight to the next. Use of cover is the central mechanic, and it's a gameplay choice that brings a certain amount of strategy to proceedings. Where to duck and when to reload become crucial issues when matched against the competent AI. The system is well implemented, with the context-sensitive options only occasionally leaving the player fumbling around in full view or glued to the wrong side of a packing crate. The sneaking, crouching and pop-up returns of fire will prove familiar to fans of *Time Crisis* – or anyone who ever played at busting Miami low-life in the school playground long ago.

On-foot levels are broken up with the occasional boat excursion, and there's also a central hub where players can turn the game into a kind of cut-price *Elite*, buying and selling drugs to earn money. A reputation system measures the flair with which Crockett or Tubbs take down perps and do deals, and there's a minigame that turns *Every Extend Extra* into a hacking sub-quest. Such diversions help balance the measured and heavily-dictated pace when it inevitably starts to turn stale – as does co-op mode, although this needs two copies of the game.

Miami Vice is undoubtedly rough around the edges, and is not without several irritating problems, ranging from a squint-inflictingly small target reticule through to a predilection for dropping you into new rooms right in front of six heavily tooled-up drug dealers. Enemies are also prone to repeating a handful of speech samples, a fault more likely to be down to limited production resources rather than an attempt to create a searing depiction of long-term drug abuse. The charismatic animation and evocative, sunset-hazed settings make up for a lot of the game's shortcomings, and although limited in lasting appeal, *Miami Vice* is solidly and imaginatively made. If you enjoy seeing two cops squaring off against a huge drug syndicate, you'll find it hard not to root for one UK developer successfully taking on a difficult genre. **[6]**



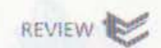
FlashRAMs can be collected in the levels, and then hacked to receive weapon and suit upgrades back at the police department HQ. The hacking method is this minigame, as diverting and engrossing as it is familiar







The game's cover system has a big role in the gameplay. Context sensitive, it litters the levels in the form of bookcases, crates, and even nightclub speakers. Choosing when to poke your head out and loose off a few shots can mean the difference between success and failure





Returning villain Specter is given his own campaign, allowing either himself or any one from a squad of classic *Escape* apes to be taken into the fray. Any eagerness for this storyline quickly vanishes once it's seen how similar it is to its 'good' equivalent

Aside from the gangs of battle-ready apes that take pot shots and sword swipes at your character, there's a scattering of more familiar *Ape Escape* monkeys to be found. Located in strange or hard to reach places, they can require some effort to capture, and can be tracked via a camera feed



APE ESCAPE: MILLION MONKEYS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£32)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), AUGUST 31 (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Or *Planet Of The Ape Escape*, as would more accurately befit *Million Monkeys*, where Sony's cutely malicious chimps attempt to overrun Earth in a bid to give Darwin's evolutionary theory a surprise conclusion. It's the fourth 'proper' title in the series, but one that could easily be mistaken for one of its numerous offshoots. Real-world locations, multiple attack vehicles to pilot and a greater emphasis on combat – it sounds like a nightmare spin-off scenario for a franchise that's sold itself on intelligent hide 'n' seek puzzles and environments that embrace bright colours instead of fearing them.

It's not a ruinous shift. The combat is energetic, mostly due to the satisfying thwap of the meleé sticks and the combos they enable, and helps make even the arena battle option feel passably entertaining. But that combat's not enduring, and is soon ground into dangerously repetitive territory due to the waves of monkeys that have to be beaten and captured before being given the chance to go after the designated 'target' chimps needed to progress through each stage. Apes teleport in on all sides, equipped with various weapons, body armour and vehicles – mechs, tanks, hovercraft and UFOs – to be subdued and imprisoned with the player's net. Some of those vehicles can be hijacked, a hardly satisfying but sometimes necessary combat boost, and boss battles, while sometimes well-presented, feel token and tedious.

The traditional *Ape Escape* control scheme – gadgets selected with the face buttons and used by moving the right analogue stick in whichever direction – feels stiff in the context of *Million Monkeys*. Once upon a PS1, it unlocked the potential of the DualShock pad in a smart and charming way; now that *Million Monkeys* has turned away from inventive stealthing and towards an all-out brawl, the controls haven't been rejigged to fit. The camera is its sorest point – although the lock-on function can help soothe it – not able to support the pace of its action very well. Still, it's further sustenance for fans, as most *Ape Escape* follow-ups have been, although none has yet managed to approach the novelty and appeal of the original. When it comes to the point that, arguably, the most entertaining *Ape Escape* since the series' inception is a comedic minigame cameo in *Metal Gear Solid 3*, there's now a pressing need for these apes to worry just as much about creativity – how to take new ideas forward more confidently than this – as creationism. **[5]**

Four-way arena battles aren't special, but they do bring out the urge to make a more creative use of the game's weapons in a way the story mode doesn't. Characters can be customised, as well as the position, name and type of each gadget

Each of the game's many characters share a standard loadout in terms of the gadgets mapped to the pad's face buttons: a meleé weapon for bashing, a net for capturing that can also be thrown, a gun and a pair of speed skates. There's variation in the details of these for each character, though



Proto-realism



Ape Escape **has always threatened to turn into some kind of unbearably sweet pop video, with its maddeningly simple ditties and a cast of tetchy primate-donnas always ready to strut and pose for the camera.** ***Million Monkeys*** **sees such an imagining come to life, sort of, as the game opens with footage of a pop show featuring dancers in Piposaru costumes stomping around to a cover of Donna Summer's I Feel Love. Throughout the game, studio-filmed news reports update the player on the emerging ape-fuelled disasters, mingled with authentic footage of cities coming under attack. The news show's ticker bar – a 'Banana Watch' update for the world's major cities – quickly gags any potential drama, though.**



POINT BLANK DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£16) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Of all the strange conceits the DS has brought out in developers, a near straight-translation of a shooting game into a point and click is perhaps one of the last we might have expected to see. The idea of taking the implicit line of sight offered by a lightgun and making it an explicit one with a stylus touch – the handheld equivalent of the age-old gun con of placing the barrel directly against the TV screen at, you guessed it, point blank range – might seem the epitome of an unfair advantage.

But strangely, the result is not an altogether disastrous one. With a year's worth of stylus-based minigames helping to ease the idea of the DS library as true diversions – quick waiting-room and morning commute pastimes – that *Point Blank* has been converted with no pretence of underlying progression or reward beyond high score bragging rights is the least of its offences. In comparison, its nearest neighbour might be *Ouendan*, minus the rhythm and the scripted comedy: a game where the only thing that stands between you and victory are a series of frequently frantic and hair-splittingly-judged screen taps in fast succession.

With some 40-odd minigames, there's enough session to session variety – or, at least, the illusion of variety with only one interaction between you and the game world – to not tire the player too quickly, and Namco Bandai has astutely learned from its neighbours' successes in adding a quasi-*Brain Training* mode, here called Brain Massage. In it, minigames are scored on a chart portending to calculate familiar attributes like attentiveness and precision, and the player is rewarded with an accompanying nonsense job title such as Fire Drill Sergeant or Pro Confetti-ist. With no real pretensions of actual learning achievement outside a line-chart of daily best scores, it works as parody, and is itself perhaps the smartest of the portable version's modes.

A consummate underachiever, *Point Blank DS* is content to scrape by on the charm of its characters, the zaniness of its minigames and the always-raucous addition of a second player, but with its proven record as an easily accessible party hit, as a sideline between sessions with meatier games it's generally right on target. **[5]**



The Games Museum gives the true Namco aficionados out there a chance to play reworked versions of early arcade pleasures, but the lack of physicality involved while playing these whack-a-mole-alikes further negates any skill involved and turns them into a simple novelty



As with the PlayStation originals, versus modes appropriately double the fun of each of the minigames, and, graciously, the game runs off of a single DS cart for multiplayer

OVER G FIGHTERS

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: TAITO



It's obviously not fair to expect pretentious panoramas and dramatic backdrops from a jet combat game that's the bookish relation of *Ace Combat*. *Over G*'s settings, by design, are bereft of features, with huge stretches of airspace overlooking sea and land. But understated looks can still be glamorous, and *Over G*'s sense of scale is lost thanks to its poorly realised ground-level detail, which fails to impress at any particular height, something that's brought into focus by HD. High-def presentation can be kind to even the barest game, its contents traced out with an appreciable cleanliness that's a relief on the eye, but here it just emphasises the dreariness; there's a difference between being planar and simply being too plain. The fine bodywork of its jets provides the sole highlight, and makes for quite a sight when looking around within the cockpit.

There's still an appeal to *Over G*, as much down to its relatively uncommon nature as to it offering loadout options to suit those who like to win their battles through preparation instead of reactions. It's an experience with a simulation-like attitude and a technical core, not so much that it's any serious obstacle, but it plays out to a weak formula of brief and stilted missions that can slip all too easily into tedium. It's in need of plenty more flare, not so much that it strains against what its buttoned-down framework is trying to achieve, but just to inject some feeling of vitality into its skirmishes and sorties.

Online tussles between the full capacity of eight fighters can alleviate this somewhat, as can the secondary single-player modes that bring deathmatching and dogfights together. But such features only rarely manage to stop *Over G* feeling as detached and impersonal as real-world warfare in the modern age was predicted to be. **[4]**



The extreme banks and dives of *Ace Combat* just aren't applicable here, not least because of the titular Over G effect. Pull into a turn too sharply, and the screen darkens as the pilot begins to lose consciousness under the strain of high G-force





A choice of wingmen is offered, with each preferring a certain category of jet; their loadouts can also be tweaked to complement the player's own. Watching the game's replays can be surprisingly serene – once the generic guitar-o-rama soundtrack has been switched off, that is


R·TYPE
R-9DH
GRACE NOTE
R-9A3
LADYLOVE
R-9ER2
UNCHAINED SILENCE
PlayStation 2
FINAL

TIME EXTEND

R-TYPE FINAL

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **IN-HOUSE (JAPAN) EIDOS (US) METRO3D (UK)**
DEVELOPER: **IREM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2003 (JAPAN) 2004 (US, UK)**



R-11B
PEACE MAKER
FORCE: GALLOP FORCE
WAVE CANNON: LOCK-ON WAVE CANNON
BIT: ROUND BIT
SHADOW BIT
MISSILE: CREEPING MISSILE
SPREAD BOMB
TORPEDO

Few series get the chance to die with dignity, but R-Type's final outing showed that taking your own life is a sure route to immortality

Games always seem to end with three dots rather than one. A climax can be as decisive as the fall of a tyrant, or even an empire, but its last beat will suggest continuation rather than closure. The root of evil will always remain intact, poised to bring new troubles upon the world and new missions for the returning, cash-starved hero. In industry terms, it just doesn't make sense to choke a potential revenue stream once it's open. Yet while no one believed the PR back in 2003, Irem had that very goal in mind: to bring its flagship series to an end, full stop.

Last month marked the third anniversary of Operation Last Dance, where *R-Type* gathered its memories, arranged its pills – 101 allied ships, 78 enemies, 84 wave cannons and 53 Forces – and took its overdose. Still, there's an unnatural silence amongst genre veterans gathered round the radar, watching the pings and waves query the future without reply, each time suspecting less and believing more that the R-9A Arrow-Head and its companion fleet are gone, never to return. Had *Final* simply played out and finished like other games, with derring-do and a sweating brow, then there would be no such lament. But it didn't.

Instead, it made its plan clear before a button was pressed, with a title screen image of a Force device lost to the sea, its control rods jutting skyward like the accents of a sepulchre. As followers of its development were already aware, *Final* was a game born to die. Though its reputation would suggest otherwise, the boldness of *R-Type*'s demise wasn't Irem's willingness to cut the series short, but the risk it took in giving it that last hurrah. Final producer Kazuma Kujo was, in fact, alone in believing the game to be a financial prospect, and with the eventual green light came a stipulation that would heavily inform its tone: that there could never be another.

The boldness of R-Type's demise wasn't Irem's willingness to cut the series short, but the risk it took in giving it that last hurrah





They're a genre hallmark – a compromise spun into a cosmetic effect – but are *Final*'s bouts of slowdown also connected to its theme? As its battles light the sky and sink the framerate, the sense of exhaustion overwhelms





FASHION SHOOTER

In its R Gallery, *Final* represents an outgoing mode of brand expression, toying with poses and backdrops for its ships with little respect for consistent or even appropriate theme. Like-minded companies, mostly Japanese, have long indulged in these calendar shoots, the most notable being Capcom and SNK with their ubiquitous, sometimes incestuous brands, and of course Nintendo. But did Irem's recognition of the shooter's demise mirror a similar decline in indulgent characterisation? Perhaps until the new generation learns to overcome its lust for naturalism and reinstate its more adventurous ideals, projects and features such as this will exist solely on the industry's fringe.





Replayed now, the game remains surprisingly rousing: despite the sombre ceremony that can make it feel morose, *R-type*'s funeral was well-attended. The slow crawl of its camera from left to right meets a Bydo procession marching the other way, energy slugs pumped into the playing field like fireworks, the old enemy seeming almost oblivious to the presence on an intruder. Were it not for the occasional background glimpse of beam weapons torching mankind or Earthly flora succumbing to Bydo plague, you'd feel disrespectful squeezing the trigger during such a black tie affair. An invulnerability mode, activated by tapping out a sequence of button-presses, feels less like a cheat than an invitation to sit back and pay your respects.

The crawl of its camera from left to right meets a Bydo procession marching the other way, energy slugs pumped into the playing field like fireworks

Much of the Silent Lab stage sees you preying on the apparently infirm and incapacitated. Bullets limp into the air from stretchered Bydo, filling the area known as the Spiral Pathway and deadening the game's pace

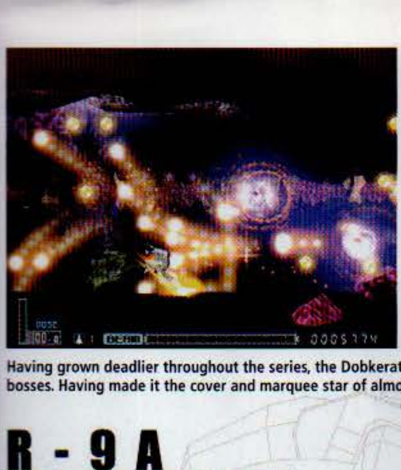
The colour and cheer of earlier *R-Types* seems dishonest in comparison, but then so does the other side of *Final*'s personality: the incorrigible warmonger, keen to show off the R Museum hangar and its menagerie of epochal Bydo killers. Stocked by discovering hidden paths through the game and accruing flight hours, it's a monument to shoot 'em up invention, boasting every permutation of chassis, shield and weapon that a boutique developer could conceive. Beyond the direct examples such as the TP-3 Mr Heli and R-11B Peace Maker (the ship from Irem's *Armed Police Unit Gallop*), each entrant stands as a chapter heading in that great chronicle of the genre that Kujo and his R-Concept team elected to close. Name checks of other Irem titles (including the R-9WZ Disaster Report and R-11S Tropical Angel) carry enough reverence to suggest that the whole company was in fact about to blast off into oblivion.







The R Museum, built in service of that




Having grown deadlier throughout the series, the Dobkeratops (right) falls farther than any of *Final*'s other returning bosses. Having made it the cover and marquee star of almost every series instalment, Irem made it a pariah in the end



founding creed – 'Blast off and strike the evil Bydo empire!' – makes sense of the discord between *Final*'s up- and downbeat attitudes. The Bydo war is finally at its end, good is finally set to triumph over evil, and the fury of R-Concept's fleet is eloquently poised against its adversary's frailty. But how does the scrolling shooter, which lives to defy and punish its players, suggest such weakness of opposition without surrendering its worth?

The answer's in the question: *Final* remains as ruthless as *R-Type* ever has been – even more so when its R-Typer difficulty level flashes its credentials – but its presentation *suggests* the opposite of the Bydo itself. Wavelink Zeal's uncharacteristically funereal score aches with resignation, turning the quite typically measured paces and trajectories of the Bydo squadrons and creatures into a chronic torpor. Nothing mechanical has changed, but the perception is transformed.

Shooters commonly seem to absorb incoming fire, bullying the player with the immunity of their levels and their ability to mass-produce enemies. But *R-Type Final* feels compromised. Its organic foes cry out upon death, the rise and release of the player's beam like that of a piledriver breaking their bones. For the first time, your campaign isn't a military push or defensive gambit, but a scouring. The mission waypoints often refer to previous





Previous *R-Types*, with their chip-sung anthems and palettes, feel like upbeat Pathe newsreels next to *Final*'s despondent frontline. Keeping enemies visibl such downcast environments is no minor achieveme



COUNTER BALANCE

The challenge for modern multi-ship shooters is to remain balanced whichever guns each side brings to bear. With its 101-strong armada, *Final* was never going to stroll to success in that department, and much of its appeal lies in finding out how a level can be turned in your favour through ship selection and configuration. While the R-9A represents the default choice and guarantees a consistent level of challenge, the last two ships unlocked are logically overpowered, with Force devices that sweep aside oncoming squadrons and wipe out ground-based artillery. Where the game becomes most interesting is in its blending of Bydo and human tech, with unpredictable weaponry throwing conventional strategy into disarray.

games' examples, but here seem somehow wrong, at odds with those earlier incarnations. The Silent Lab, with its gurneys, cots and amniotic tanks, is as much a field hospital as a source of Bydo manpower. As you later infiltrate the heart of the enemy's domain, hundreds of floating eyes watch passively as you pass between them, into the heart of the empire to deliver the first of several killing blows. The credits roll, and you're left with the impression that not only is Bydo on the back foot, but that something more profound is still to come.

Where most shooters draw a high score table, Final traces the edges of time and space, where Human and Bydo become one

As said previously, *Final* isn't like other games, and it doesn't even play like the game you initially think it is. It's a concept shooter, and as such ends with a conceptual journey hidden along the branches of its level tree. The hints of power and weakness described thus far are too superficial to pen that bold finale, and what emerges as you strive for a more thorough exploration of the game proper and the R Museum is a genre-stretching expression of closure. Where most shooters draw a high score table, *Final* traces the edges of time and space, where Human and Bydo become one.

The harbinger of that end appears far sooner than when the hangar receives its first hybrid ships – twisted javelins of flesh, metal and light – and sooner even than the firing of the game's first shot. It's *Final*'s leading image, after all, and is bolted to front of your ship from thereon in, as it has been since 1987.

The Force is where all memories of *R-Type* start, and Kujo chose it as a catalyst and symbol of where they would end. Bydo tissue cradled in a synthetic reactor, it's both your enemy and saviour,



indestructible and indispensable. And with the game's few moments of exposition – flight logs, speeches and epitaphs recorded as overawed verse, faded in as text before levels – *Final* turns that mechanic into metaphor. Tradition has seen the Force flung across the screen as a strategic gamble, momentarily weakening the player; once re-coupled, that weakness is overcome. *Final* draws a parallel between that process and the timeline of the Bydo war: its flashpoint being the exile of the man-made Bydo weapon to the far reaches of the galaxy, the resolution being its return and assimilation. For all the significance of *Final* staying true to its name, there's much to be said for the level of drama during such fleeting opportunities.



Final's epilogue of Human/Bydo synthesis is the kind of touch that, in the wrong hands, could seem like prime sequ meat; its conclusive stance will hopefully serve as a safeguard to preserve the power of such an open-ended closu



R-9W
WISE MAN

BX-T
DANTALION

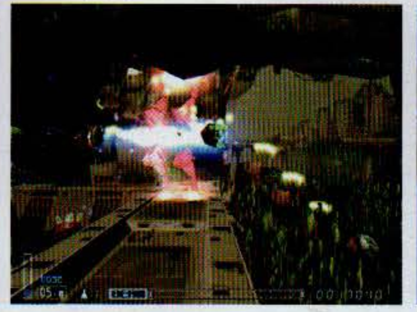
R-9AX
DELICATESSEN

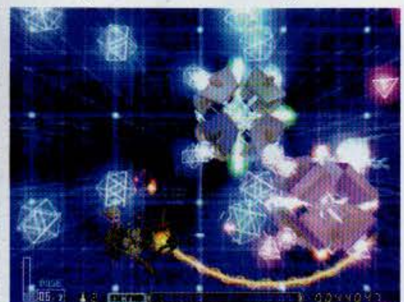
Through a handful of words, its unseen pilot cuts a Dave Bowman figure as he's hurled through the hidden final stages, titled Forest Watchdog, Wherever, Summer Night, Anti-Space and Beautiful Erasure. His ship mutates into a higher power, and its destinations become increasingly abstract and elemental. In Irem's book, that's how you achieve the impossible and close out a shoot-em-up: not with a tale of victory or defeat, but of emergence. Likewise, *Final* is a send-off that leaves you neither despondent nor elated but proud, as its developer must have been when pairing Hekiru Shiina's song Proud Of You with the game's closing credits.

Perhaps if publishers didn't think one step ahead all the time, towards sequels rather than the games at hand, we'd see more such dignified departures. Irem's thinking with *R-Type Final* wasn't of future or even present success, but of enshrining the past. And the tranquillity of the series' euthanasia leaves you free to appreciate its place in history, its developer's resolve, and furthermore the pain of those that still flee their own mortality – *Final Fight* and the other drowning men of the old guard, clawing frantically for modern appeal and sinking quicker into the sand.



At first steeled by absolute distinctions between good and evil, mankind and Bydo, the game's unnamed hero soon finds such propaganda to be at odds with the truth. The outcome of *R-Type Final* is far from the average bullet rush







THE MAKING OF...
METROPOLIS STREET RACER

Delayed from a console's launch to its twilight months, it took several false starts and a total rewrite before Bizarre's city-racing dream was finally cast

FORMAT: **DREAMCAST** PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **NOV 2000 (UK)**

M*etropolis Street Racer* began in 1997, with a plop. Or maybe a 'yoink', or whatever's the most suitable sound effect for a PlayStation power lead being pulled from the back of the console. "Kats [Sato, Sega's producer on *MSR*] was given the task of finding out who was developing *Formula 1* for Sony. So, at the ECTS, he pulled out the power cable so he could see the start-up credits," explains **Martyn Chudley**, managing director of Bizarre Creations both now and then. And, from a plop or a yoink, it's on to a martial arts luminary bringing his hand down onto a large plank of wood: "After finding out that Bizarre was responsible, a meeting was arranged with Kazutoshi Miyake, the then head of Sega Europe. His reputation preceded him – a keen karate star from Japan, and very scary. We walked into the meeting to face a large, stern man who put both hands on the table and bellowed: 'With *Formula 1*, you have done great harm to Sega!' Our initial reaction was to hide under the table but, after the shock, we realised he was joking, and they wanted us to work for them too."

With two F1 titles for PS1 in the bag at that point in 1997, and more looming in the future, *Formula 1* began feeling somewhat, well, formulaic. "When we found out that Psygnosis had us pencilled in for five years' worth of F1 games, we decided that Sega could give us the opportunity to branch out. There was only so far we could take copying the kind of reality required for F1. Oh, and Dreamcast, or Katana/Ninja as it was at the time, looked great!" says Chudley. The initial schedule saw development kicking off in September 1997, with the target of producing the master disc at the end of August 1998, ready for Dreamcast launch in Japan. A gestation period of just one year, as anyone who's played *MSR*

"He bellowed: 'With Formula 1 you have done great harm to Sega!' Our initial reaction was to hide under the table, but he was joking"



"We had a fabulous relationship with producer Kats (below, far right). There were always jokes played on him, due to his reluctance to make the tea," says Chudley (front row, fourth from left). "One time, we were trying to explain the word 'piles' to him. So we gave him a bunch of grapes, held at arm's length. We left him like that for 45 minutes while he was on the phone to his boss. Eventually, we explained that you 'get these up your bottom,' and holding them out was for our gratification – sorry Kats!"







While *MSR* aimed for the height of possible realism, corners had to be cut. Says Chudley: "The London taxi we had in the game was actually a Liverpool black cab, something pointed out to us by a fan."

GT CONSCIENCE

"At one point," says Chudley, "one of the coders decided, for a laugh, to add a bunch of internal default number plates to the game, which included Bizarre in-jokes such as 'Degsy', 'Cry8a8y, 'Sausage' and such, but he also added one called 'GT WHO?' in reference to *Gran Turismo*. We were mortified to find that this remained in a build that went out to some journalists. Lo and behold, we found a screenshot floating around with 'GT WHO?' emblazoned on the front of a car. This completely went against the Bizarre philosophy of never, ever putting any other project down, even in jest."

knows, was wildly optimistic plan, but typical of the reach of its top-drawer ambitions. "It was always going to be a street racer, but nothing else was decided in the early stages. Initially, Sega had the idea to get the licence to make it a Ferrari-exclusive title, which spawned its first codename, Crimson. But that didn't materialise, and so we headed down the route of producing a Mini game, kinda like The Italian Job but set in various cities. But that didn't seem to have broad enough appeal for the global audience. So multiple, and affordable, sports cars it was."

Starting out as *Sega Street Racer*, the name was changed to *Metropolis*, on account of its cities, with its full and final moniker resulting from Sega's need for the title to be more explicit about the game's nature. With its garage of real cars becoming a reality, how did the game's three real-world cities come about? Why choose more reality, after moving away from F1's bookish accuracy? "We started out trying to create fake cities, but they simply looked completely fake. And joining real landmarks with fake buildings looked just as crap – why should we think we could model stuff in days that architects took years to design? So our only course of action was to create real, accurate cities, especially as this played on our heritage of creating real F1 circuits. After trying a very early internal tech demo (with audio accompaniment of the The Worm That Turned music) of Trafalgar Square – and that made it into the final game – we decided to go for it. London and Tokyo were obvious, given the locations of Sega and Bizarre, while San Francisco was decided upon when a friend of ours was sent there with work, and his wife, who loves photography, was looking for something to do while they were out there.

"Our first real research trip was to Japan, plodding round the streets with Kats. We got to meet Sega's president and see the impressive HQ, and AM groups." And time for another sound effect, a distant but worrying splat: "On the way back to the hotel room one day, we dropped one of our precious rolls of research photo film between the doors of the lift and it fell 30 stories – we managed to get a janitor to find it for us, but it was bent beyond recognition."

And then, with the game's first showing at E3 in 1999, it was time for a big gulp, as far more than a reel of research snaps was put out of joint: "The game started out being coded by a huge Sega fan who definitely favoured the *Sega Rally* school of handling, and although that can be fun, when it was coupled with a fisheye viewpoint it made the game less realistic than we wanted. The design at this point was quite basic – it was a checkpoint street-racing game more along the lines of *Crazy Taxi* or *Harley-Davidson*.

"At one point we even had some crates to knock around the city, inspired by car-chase moments from American cop shows"

At one point we even had some crates to knock around the city, inspired by the traditional car-chase moments from American cop shows.

"Development moved slowly, and the initial schedule was out of the window. 1999 rolled around, and we needed to put together a



This 1996 snap shows the Bizarre team not long before *MSR*'s conception. The core staff on *MSR* has been at the heart of every *PGR* game since.



At one point, a team-focused race mode was planned, using brash decals as gang colours (see above, and right) an idea that didn't resurface, visually at least, in the subsequent *PGR* series.





demo for E3, our first real outing. Just before the event, with the demo finished, the lead coder decided to leave. The demo got slated, with the camera and handling coming in for harsh criticism all round. And the inclusion of fireworks, fighter jets flying low overhead and a whole squadron of balloons taking off didn't exactly go down too well either – not exactly realistic."

So, no lead coder, now financially in the red, a poor demo reception under its belt and scant time until intended completion, Bizarre had seemingly got a problem. "All that was coupled with one of our senior artists deciding to move back home, away from Liverpool. Thankfully, Sega had faith in us and decided that the quality of the game was more important than the US/UK Dreamcast launch date, especially as they had other impressive titles ready. And we had some money put by from *Formula 1* to keep the company afloat whilst we tried to finish *MSR*..."

Chudley stepped back into the direct development of the game to take charge of design, structure and programming – not having coded since his work on the first F1 title – along with Roger Perkins, a tools coder on another Bizarre project, and began what would amount to a total rewrite of the engine. "We found that it wasn't flexible or robust enough to carry off the ambitions we had," Chudley reveals. "The first thing we did was increase the polygon counts of the cars, and change the camera viewing angle to make it feel more real, and less like flying a *Wipeout* spaceship. Immediately, it became more like the *MSR* that hit the shelves.

"As for the rest of the team, one of the driving factors for the artists was that they all wanted to create something that really pushed the boundaries, in terms of realism. The amount of research that they had collected from each of the cities was phenomenal, and there was a huge ongoing argument about reality versus fun. The artists wanted to make the cities 100 per cent accurate, and if that meant that you could only get



Bizarre Creations' replication of Tokyo shows the immense level of accuracy that was aimed for, even if the best place for it to be shown off – in replay mode – had its own development troubles

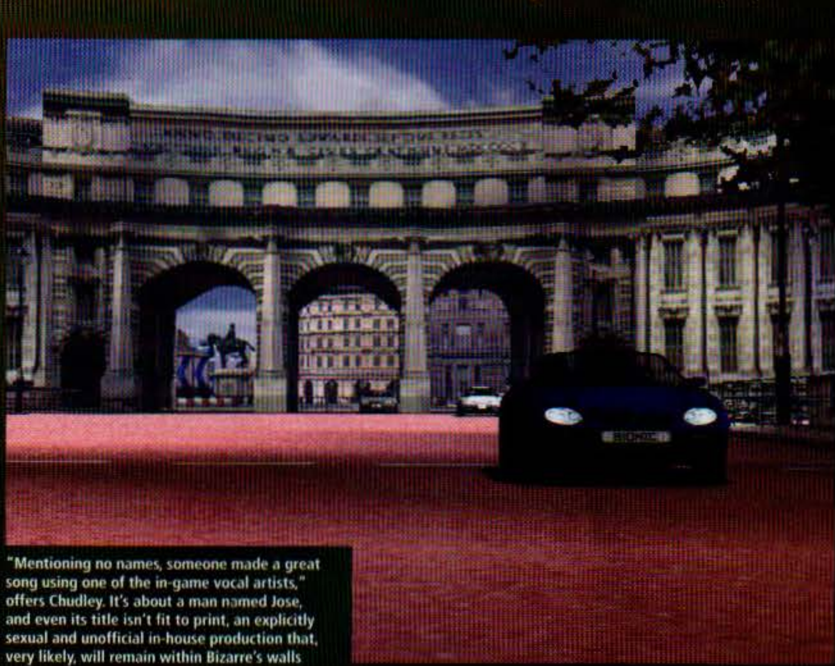


GEOMETRY WAS

It was never intended as a serious question, but how rubbish would *Geometry Wars* have been on a VMU? But the answer is something that, at first glance, seems like scoop of the year for unreleased games – *Geometry Wars* running on the Dreamcast's playable memory unit. It's not real, unfortunately, but a retort from Bizarre Creations' animator Jeff Lewis.

one car between the pillars of the London Monument, then tough! In the end, though, compromises were made and we all felt that we created a good balance between the cities feeling totally correct, and still managing to play well.

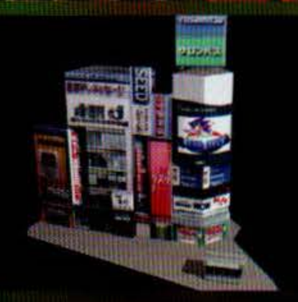
"The detail of the game wasn't just aimed at the cities. The cars and the audio aspect got their fair attention. We hired a Mercedes SLK from a sports car hire place so that we could take an engine recording, telling them we were using it for 'a day out'. This 'day out' obviously happened to be at a test track, on a rolling road. Microphones in place, we repeatedly took it up and down through the gears… until, completely unexpectedly, the engine blew! The nice people



"Mentioning no names, someone made a great song using one of the in-game vocal artists," offers Chudley. It's about a man named Jose, and even its title isn't fit to print, an explicitly sexual and unofficial in-house production that, very likely, will remain within Bizarre's walls







Ever-changing details, such as the contents of posterboards and hoardings, could be precisely positioned, at least (above/below right). A game centred on the Mini licence (above left) was in the works at one point



at the track helped us tow it to a country lane from where we could call the AA. All was well until the hire company saw the SLK's engine management report from the garage – they knew exactly what we'd been doing. Sega got billed thousands for a replacement engine."

Metropolis Street Racer has a proud list of ambitions to parade beyond its aim to photocopy cities – a career mode progression centred on the player being able to gamble on their performance in each event and the use of a realtime clock to dictate a circuit's time-of-day settings, down to the position of the sun. And then there are the less innovative, but prominent, features – the soundtrack, for example (see 'Track designer'). A collection of joyfully cheesy genre pieces linked up via location-faithful radio stations, they're as much a part of the *MSR* experience as anything, a connection that seems unlikely to ever occur again in the field of serious racing games. Was there ever any resistance to a non-licensed OST? "No, the music was planned from the start. It had to suit the game, and licensed music was a high-cost option at the time. So Richard [Jacques, sound producer at Sega Europe on *MSR*] decided that creating styles and fake radio to suit the cities was the best way to go. It's a pretty amazing feat, considering the huge difference in styles he had to create."

Most prominent in the game's CV, though, is the Kudos system, awarding scores to those who could drive with fishtailing flair, that's grown to encompass an ever-greater number of race manoeuvres with each instalment of *Project Gotham Racing*. Wrapping a combo system around an unexpected genre isn't yet a commonplace occurrence, granted, but its appearance is no longer surprising. At the time, however, *MSR*'s philosophy was a strange one, and needs explaining. "We knew that *Gran Turismo* was the real competition, but we wanted to make something different, something that blurred the line between arcade and simulation, similar to what we had done a couple of years previously with the *Formula 1* series – create a 'serious' package that was easily accessible, particularly in the handling front.

"I'd been racing a Fiesta XR2 in my Toyota MR2 and I remember thinking 'Wey hey! I'm going to die!'– hence the message in MSR"

"We worked hard to try and find something that'd fit with the racing ethos, but still bring something new to the genre that would catch the imagination. Being a bit of a speed freak, I thought about my own racing experiences, and where the real thrill came from. I'd been racing a Fiesta XR2 in my Toyota MR2, and realised that stylish driving was as much of a thrill as the speed. And so, Kudos was born. In fact, I remember thinking 'Wey hey! I'm going to die!' at one point – hence the 'Wey hey!' message in the game that appears whenever the player powerslides. The Sega management initially didn't like the idea of Kudos, even though the development people really did. They'd asked for a street racer, and because it didn't follow the pattern of all the other street racing games out there, they were nervous. But, gradually, we won them over.

"We wanted the player to be able to play the game at their own level – and so we introduced the element of gambling and setting the target of each challenge. If the player set a tough challenge, the Kudos they would gain would be



TRACK DESIGNER

Richard Jacques' soundtracks are as much a part of Sega's recent history as anything else. And, despite the numerous plaudits laid before his work on the *Headhunter* games, its *MSR*'s audio that arguably the most characterful and atypical. "It was probably the longest project I have worked on," says Jacques. "I had to create everything pretty much single-handedly, with some assistance from Bizarre's audio programmer: 27 in-game music tracks which utilised session singers, rappers, three guitarists, bass and a four-piece brass section plus some other overdubbed instruments; additional front end music; scripts for nine different DJs plus all the dialogue recording and editing; weather and traffic reports; real radio advertisements for brands such as Tango, Rough Guide, Planet Perfecto Records, The Sports Café, plus many more; as well as all the sound design and car recordings and implementation.

"The songs were indeed meant to be both parodies and cover various genres to fit with the radio stations. From a lyrical point of view, they were meant to be slightly tongue in cheek, too. It was indeed a great experience, and out of all the soundtracks I have produced over the past 12 years or so, I seem to receive the most emails about *MSR*. Some people also drive their real life cars with the *MSR* soundtrack pumping. Go figure..."



Long before *PGR3*'s orgy of retentively faithful detail, Bizarre Creations – with Richard Jacques in tow – strove to capture vehicle sounds precisely. Here's a recording session without an explosion





Chudley on *MSR*'s intro sequence: "It wasn't some swanky Hollywood production – it was filmed by racing a VX220 against Kats' Fiat Turbo around London – which included getting permission to close a busy street"



"We had a problem with Westminster all the time," says Chudley of the London course. "We couldn't work out why until we realised the *huge* amount of polygons that Julie (McGurren, city artist on *MSR*) had put into a simple bench outside a pub, because she loved high-detail modelling, and wanted to push the technology"



CUBED ROUTE

"Making games for new hardware is always fraught," says Chudley. "We had gone through hardware revision after hardware revision, library after library, and we thought we'd really nailed it. However, when we finally had to release a demo disc to the consumer, it went out just fine, mounted on the front of a respected Dreamcast magazine as an exclusive, but a hardware bug meant that trees were displayed as cubes on some revisions of the console. So much for being the most realistic representations of cities around..."

significantly more. However, failure would result in the loss of all previously gained Kudos on that challenge, with the game only remembering the most recent score on each stage. We felt this was a truly groundbreaking system – the player made the game as difficult as *they* wanted, and not just what the game wanted.

"This difficulty selection seemed to work well, really rewarding the players who pushed themselves to the limits. The problems came, however, when this was scaled up over the entire career mode. The game unlocked events based on the overall amount of Kudos a player had. Once they reached a certain level, subsequent challenges were made available. However, because we couldn't judge the skill of the player, we had to make the unlock Kudos levels very low, as we didn't want any players getting stuck.

The downside was that better players were unlocking the game at a far faster rate than they could play it – so after the first three or four 'chapters' of challenges, they were finding that the entire remainder of the game was available, and the sense of progression was lost."

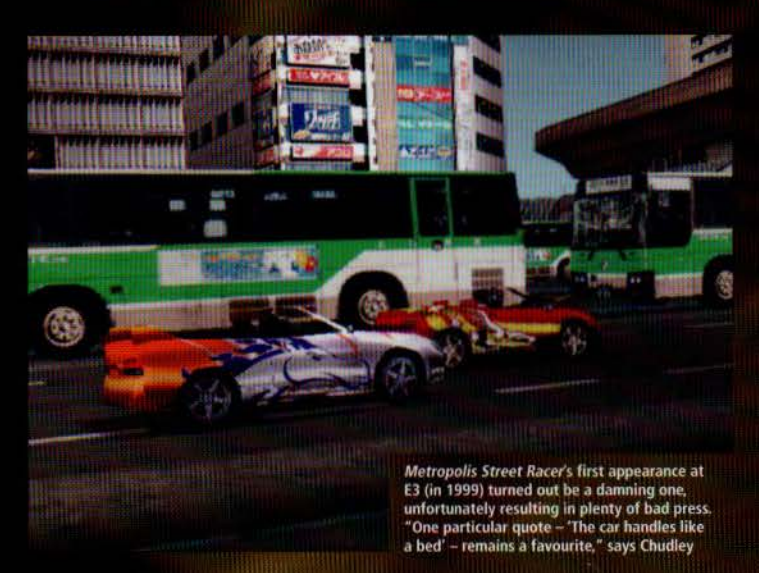
Under pressure from a deadline forever being pushed back but looming larger and darker as time went by, *MSR* didn't crumble under the weight and didn't manifest as a half-hearted mishmash of overreaching ideas hobbled by the realities of commercial release. The things that Bizarre Creations wanted to happen did, mostly, happen – even if the entire project threatened to turn into a sitcom during its last moments of development. And, ultimately, there was a light at the end of the tunnel – but it came from a thunderstorm, not the glitter of a stint at the top of the All Formats sales chart.

"1999 dragged on and on, with everyone in crunch mode *all* the time. Some people were clocking up 40 hours of overtime every week. This period lasted not just a few months, but 14. Other than the artwork, we pretty much had to write the whole game in this period. After over a year of suffering, the game was ready to test, but Sega was really stretched in London. So they packed up a lead tester and sent him up to us in Liverpool, where he had to form the team from people he could find/train. But it was very handy to have the publisher's test team on site though – a luxury most developers didn't have.

"The last master disc of the game was burned after a double all-nighter. Late into the final evening, with submission at 9am the following day, the first set of master discs were burnt. One of the first major problems we found was with the demo loop. We had set up some mega-cool replays showing the AI racing, sliding and overtaking, all really dramatic. But once burnt onto a disc, we found that they all completely misbehaved – the cars would become erratic and crash into each other randomly – not exactly the best way of showing off the game to the public. After some judicious, tired hacking from Walter [Lynsdale, *MSR*'s technical director] it was resolved.

"There's more to Walter's involvement in that final stretch, though. He decided that making the AI beep their horns when they crashed was simply the funniest thing in the world – and it probably would have been if it wasn't something he put in on the night we were mastering. The *next* batch of discs, these came back with a big problem at 4am – there was no music in the front-end! One of the coders had decided he didn't like it, and had simply disabled it. Thing is, he did this in the release section of the code.

"Even when the game was completed, some people still didn't understand that it was not just a traditional racer"



Metropolis Street Racer's first appearance at E3 (in 1999) turned out be a damning one, unfortunately resulting in plenty of bad press. "One particular quote – 'The car handles like a bed' – remains a favourite," says Chudley

BACK TO FRONTS

During the entire development period, and something indicative of the "completely seat-of-the-pants process" that Bizarre had at the time, there were numerous frontends and visual themes created for the game (with some, but not all, seen here). Graffiti sketches (directly below) seem the most ill-fitting, while the abstract card-style menu (bottom, second from left) is the most intriguing. Two places to the right of that is an interface shot from the game's earliest moments, when known as just *Metropolis*.



















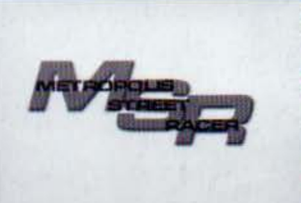






















Third time, luckily, was where it all went right, with discs burned at 5am, and tested at 6am in the middle of a huge thunderstorm – very dramatic."

If the events didn't have the making of a sitcom, then they certainly had the makings of a soap opera. At 6am, and having been awake for 48 hours, Chudley had to leave in order to catch the plane that would take him off to Crete to be married, after driving through the storm with one of the game's producers – the best man – in pursuit. A happy ending was had, for the record.

A not-so-happy ending laid in wait for the game itself, however. "It was finally released in November 2000, just as Dreamcast was having its final Christmas. Despite a good reception from the press the game went on to sell, roughly, a measly 120,000 units. This was probably due to a variety of issues, obviously partly due to the demise of Dreamcast and a number of high-profile bugs that remained in the game, but also its lateness. And even when the game was completed, some people still didn't understand that it was not just a traditional racer – the advertising for the US version made little or no reference to the Kudos system. We pretty much knew that Dreamcast was on its last legs. We asked Sega about putting the game onto PS2, but they didn't want to. This really left us with no further options. We had sunk around £1 million of Bizarre's money into the game, and we could see no way of ever seeing that money again."

From a plop to a commercial flop – such was the circle of *MSR*'s life – but that's not to sell short the fact that a healthy number of that 120,000 likely still hold *MSR* in high regard. It was a unique production for an irreplaceable console, a console that seemed to specialise in games that meant a lot to too few people. Not that a eulogy is in order for either Bizarre Creations or its racer, of course. "At the time, Microsoft was making noises about the launch of Xbox, and we approached them to see if they would be interested in an open-wheel racing game that we had an inkling of a design for. However, they seemed far more impressed with the game we had just released, and, as we had rights to everything bar the name, *Project Gotham Racing* was born from the ashes. A year later, and with the inclusion of New York as the fourth city, it went on to sell over two million units. Finally, we had our launch game on a new piece of hardware!"



If the customisable number plate couldn't house your chosen particularly witty expletive, *MSR* also allowed you edit its onscreen messages



PGR3 rarely travels off-road in the manner of *MSR*, which wound its risky routes through skinny backstreets, parks and city monuments

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Guerrilla

DATE FOUNDED: 2000 (as Lost Boys Games) relaunched in 2003 as Guerrilla

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: more than 120

KEY STAFF: Hermen Hulst, managing director; Arjan Brussee, development director



URL: www.guerrilla-games.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
ShellShock: Nam '67 (PC, PS2, Xbox); *Killzone* (PS2)







Following on from the success of the first *Killzone* game on PS2, the PSP's *Killzone: Liberation* (above, with the PS3 game below) makes the jump from firstperson to a thirdperson, top-down viewpoint





LOCATION: Amsterdam, The Netherlands

CURRENT PROJECTS: *Killzone: Liberation* (PSP); an untitled *Killzone* project (PS3)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Situated in a restored canal house in the heart of Amsterdam, Guerrilla lies at the centre of a cultural nexus in more ways than one. The studio employs over 120 people from 20 different nationalities, using English as the common working language. Its commitment to recruiting, developing and retaining the best talent in the games industry has made Guerrilla an expert in 'the expat experience.'

"Founded in 2000 as the result of a merger between three smaller Dutch studios, Guerrilla quickly climbed to a position of prominence among Europe's game developers. Its outstanding technology and strong artistic vision also attracted the attention of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, which acquired the studio in 2005. Today, Guerrilla forms a key creative element of the SCE Worldwide Studios network.

"*Killzone,* Guerrilla's squad-based firstperson shooter for the PlayStation 2, has sold nearly two million copies since its release in 2004. The studio is currently working to expand *Killzone* into a fully-fledged franchise with two highly anticipated follow-ups: *Killzone Liberation* for the PlayStation Portable, and an as-yet untitled *Killzone* project for the PlayStation 3."



Codeshop
Tracking developments in development

Firm foundations

The future of middleware isn't big, showy technology: lightweight development frameworks are shaking down conventional wisdom



Chris Satchell, Game Developer Group manager at Microsoft

Every press release written by a games tools company over the past five years has encompassed at least some of the sentiments of better, faster or cheaper. After all, the only reason developers bought such middleware was to improve the efficiency of their games production. The advent of consoles such as PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 has skewed this golden triangle, though. Now it's more a case of all or nothing. Buying in technology which only brings marginal improvements to the same old development process is no longer enough for many.

Of course in certain niches, 'better, faster and cheaper' tools companies will still survive, and a few may even prosper. If you can prove there's a return on investment for a better texturing tool, or the fastest tree generation engine, there will be buyers. But, as has been proved by the surprisingly rapid take-up of expensive (and potentially disruptive) game creation technologies such as Epic's Unreal Engine 3, the big money is now being made with middleware that provides a self-contained development environment.

The ironic thing about engines such as Unreal (and Criterion's RenderWare before it), however, is that once developers get their hands on the tech, they often spend man-years ripping out and rewriting components or bolting their own special sauce on top of what they've bought.



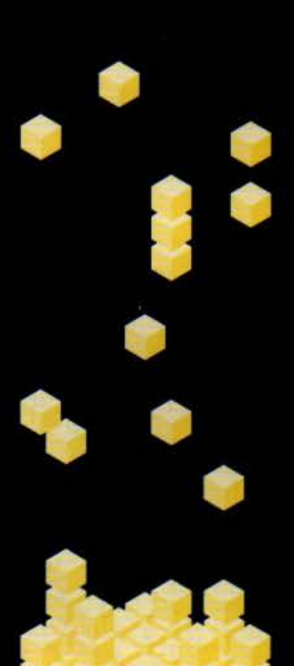
The big money is now being made with middleware that provides a self-contained development environment

And it's these issues companies such as Microsoft, Freescale and Emergent Game Technologies are trying to address with a more holistic approach; selling low-level development frameworks.

Instead of providing a monolithic solution, these technologies are perhaps best viewed as a basic skeleton which ensures a game is constructed in a streamlined and logical manner, all the while providing developers with plenty of choice over which components such as physics and networking engines they want to use.

"The process of developing games is increasingly complex, and game developers are having to rely on a growing arsenal of middleware and in-house tools as a result," explains **Chris Satchell**, who as Microsoft's Game Developer Group manager is overseeing its new XNA Framework project amongst





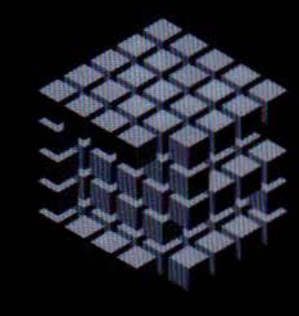
Xbox 360 meets Vista

Unveiled at the 2006 Game Developers Conference, XNA Framework is Microsoft's effort to converge developers within a combined Windows and Xbox 360 environment. It does this via a unified set of game-focused libraries, which enable the maximum reuse of code and game assets across both platforms. Based on Microsoft's PC .NET Framework 2.0, it uses an Xbox 360-customised version of the company's Common Language Runtime virtual machine to abstract out the differences between the platforms, as well as relying on a common programming language in the shape of Microsoft's C#.

"C# is already used by many game studios for their internal tools, as well as for Windows games, but until the XNA Framework, there hasn't been an option to do the same on the Xbox 360," says Satchell of some of the productivity benefits he forsees.

And although still in its early stages of development, he says he's pleased with the progress so far. "With the XNA Framework we already have people making amazing game demos sharing 99 per cent of the same code across both platforms," he reveals.

"Our Culture demo shown at GDC was developed from scratch in three weeks by a C++ developer who had never written a line of C#, which is amazing considering it was an early alpha version of the XNA Framework with zero documentation."





The elements of change

The most interesting of the new framework approaches is that offered by Emergent Game Technologies. Formed by the merger of online technology company Butterfly.net and engine company NDL, the revitalised entity now offers a range of different game development components, which are available either as standalone products or as a conjoined whole.

"With any technology framework, the trick is to make sure it's not constricting," says Mellon. "It's got to be flexible, extensible and it's got to fit the needs of the user. That's the big reason why our framework is totally modular: plug in the parts you need, unplug the parts you don't."

Unlike the offerings from Microsoft and Freescale, which are basically low-level programming environments, Emergent's Elements framework encompasses high-level components such as a game engine, Gamebryo Element; an automated build and testing component, Automation Element; and a data collection and analysis block, Metrics Element. The company is working on server technology for massively multiplayer online games and an online game hosting and management service as well. And it's also signed integration and distribution deals with four other small middleware providers to offer its customers additional user interface, procedural texturing and networking technologies within the Emergent umbrella.

It might seem a strange assortment, but Mellon argues there's plenty of common ground. "I think the question should be: 'How can these components not work together as a complete whole?'" he scolds. "We believe developers need to focus on the whole craft of game development, and that extends beyond graphics into relatively new areas like metrics and automation. When these pieces work together in lock-step, the result will be a breakthrough in gaming experience."



Bridging the gap from old-style middleware to the new wave is Emergent's Gamebryo engine (top), which as well as being an integral component in its Elements framework, also comes with its own scene editor and art tool plug-ins. One part of Emergent's Elements framework is its Metrics Element (above), which enables developers to collect and analyse data

other XNA tools. "Solutions that don't provide the flexibility to incorporate these middleware and tools aren't solutions at all," he continues.

Similar sentiments are expressed by **Larry Mellon**, the vice president of engineering at Emergent Game Technologies. "Our industry is being forced to develop scalable processes," he says. "The most successful and creative studios are the ones that have few boundaries between different teams working on a game. The right framework helps break down those walls, bringing disparate teams together."

Another point stressed by Freescale's **Roger Edgar**, who manages the company's Game Technology Organization, concerns how using frameworks such as Freescale's Radix Studio can enable re-use of technology. "Once a title has shipped, a lot of game studios will chuck their homegrown tools and start over," he says. "We now have a way for them to preserve the investment they've made as they can plug those tools into an architecture that's easy to understand."

So while they're never likely to make the headlines, the rise of the frameworks is yet another example of how the creation of entertainment products is becoming a much more serious business.



Resharpening CodeWarrior's edge

Perhaps the most open of the three frameworks is Freescale's CodeWarrior Radix Studio. It's described by Edgar as being so flexible you can even plug the framework in to other frameworks.

"We've done an integration with Collada [the Sony-inspired digital asset exchange system] so that you can pull it into Radix and start to get cross-pollination," he says. "Graphics guys who are interested in Collada aren't going to be working within the same tool as a hardcore C++ guy, but they will be working within the same environment."

And it's this ability to combine art tools such as Maya with programming tools like SlickEdit, as well as other broader standards such as Collada, that Edgar says will be the key selling point for Radix.

Yet what's surprising about Radix is that, in and of itself, it's not a very intelligent piece of technology.

"It is fairly dumb," Edgar agrees. "It doesn't really know what it contains, but the important thing is it enforces these rigorous Queensberry rules so none of the packages working within it beat up on each other. In this way, the functionality of the overall system is driven by the packages within it."

CodeWarrior Radix Studio is initially being made available as part of the official development environment for Nintendo's Wii console. Running on Windows, it provides an XML-based project system; editing, debugging and code browsing capabilities; hot-swappable plug-ins and, in the case of Wii, a PowerPC compiler. Also important is a scriptable workflow to enable developers to integrate their own proprietary tools via the provided SDK.

In time, however, CodeWarrior Radix Studio for PlayStation 3 will become available, and considering Freescale's experience with handheld devices, it wouldn't be much of a surprise to see the likes of DS, PSP and their successors caught up in the Radix embrace too. After all, as Edgar points out, one of the key drivers of developer efficiency is maintaining cross-platform consistency.

One of the most important components of FreeScale's CodeWarrior Radix Studio is its debugger (above), which is shown here in the dual monitor layout, with various menus such as code editor open, and docked windows showing disassembly, connection and register information



Demonstrating components such as the editor, code browser, workspace, file structure and code completion, Radix provides a solid framework into which a wide range of other development packages and tasks can be integrated

www.microsoft.com/xna
www.freescale.com
www.emergent.net

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

RETURN OF THE HANDHELD

BY JEFF MINTER

I've just put down my PSP! The poor thing's been gathering dust for so long it's a real treat to use it again. It was last out bigtime for *Me And My Katamari*, and again briefly for *OutRun 2* – but I think I'm all driving-gamed out, because it resumed lurking shortly afterwards... until someone mentioned that *LocoRoco* was out, and that looked intriguing.

And my PSP is out! It's right next to me on my desk, soaking up a charge. *LocoRoco* is a really lovely game, with a large portion of *Katamari*'s sunny, happy vibe (and thank Goat something is carrying on where *Katamari* left off. I admit to being most saddened by the news that there was to be no more *Katamari* from Namco, who instead would turn their attentions to *Pac-Man Karting* and versions of *Galaxians* for mobile phones). *LocoRoco* inherits from *Katamari* the mechanic of rolling about to get bigger and the insanely cheery music; it also borrows from platformers in general, with a dash of *Lemmings* and even a hint of (for those with long memories) the excellent, simple and quirky *Boogaboo The Flea*.

It's a perfect little slice of handheld gaming – levels that can be played through in just a few minutes each, perfect for a little break here and there; not too difficult to just romp all the way through if you feel like it, but with a lot of residual challenge to bring you back aiming for perfect survival and collectables and a better time. Someone on the PSP design team needs feeding to the Moja, though – what genius thought that putting the power/hold switch right where you cup the console in your hands would be such a great idea? I thought *LocoRoco* was buggy at first because every few levels the controls would stop responding until I powered the PSP off and on – until someone mentioned what was really happening: during play one naturally tends to twist the PSP about a bit (stupid I know, but your body just does it) as you attempt to bounce your little guys around the screen, and it's easy to accidentally push the switch so it goes into Hold mode. Duh.

I've had trouble in other games too. In *Gottlieb Pinball* I tend to hold the machine in such a way that during a particularly clenched flip it's possible to actually accidentally turn the bloody thing off mid-game. I know – perhaps I should modify my style of PSP usage so as not to fumble the switch, but would it have been too much trouble to put it on the top where it's not in contact with twitching, gaming flesh?

It's nice to see Sony releasing an original 2D game – for ages Sony had a reputation as being a bit anti-2D in general (which is a bit silly, really; as a game designer I think it's daft to assume that simply because good 3D is possible that necessarily everything therefore must be in 3D – it's appropriate for the designer to choose whichever medium is appropriate for his design, not for available technology to dictate it). Ninty of course never shied away from 2D, and it's good to see *LocoRoco* not only using 2D but also proving that it needn't just be all pre-drawn sprites and tile scrolling. The world and characters are nicely modelled – it's all vectorised so everything is smoothly scalable and rotatable, and objects are made with mass-spring modelling allowing them to gloop, squish and deform in an interesting and groovy manner.

> "It's good to see LocoRoco not only using 2D but also proving that it needn't just be all pre-drawn sprites and tile scrolling"

Most of my gaming's handheld at the moment – partly I think because it's summer, so long nights in front of a big console aren't the thing. And unfortunately, one thing that takes time away from gaming is the act of making a game oneself – hours spent at the PC fiddling with code and trying things out rather than dungeoning in *Oblivion* and suchlike. So I'm in quick bite mode, a few minutes of DS (and now PSP) snatched between compiles. And as it's summer I'm in a mood for happy, sunny gaming, so it's been all about *New Super Mario* and *LocoRoco* and, of course, *Animal Crossing* on the DS (which I have played every day, with a couple of exceptions, since before Christmas – I remember standing outside the pub to watch the new year fireworks go off while watching them go off in my *AC* town on my DS). I know *AC* isn't everyone's cup of tea – in some respects it isn't even a game – but I can't think of a single game I've played for such a long time, and so regularly, so they must be doing something right.

Still, it's past midsummer and the nights are lengthening; hopefully September will bring a return to console gaming chez Yakkie with the release of *Dead Rising*, and the happy, shiny, summer blue-sky gaming vibe will succumb to long sessions of beating zombies' brains out. Maybe by then there will also be some new XBLA releases too, and maybe some full-price releases that I'm actually interested in buying.

However, right now, what I really need is to get a bull and a sheep in my *AC* village, and to finish all the levels of world one in *LocoRoco* with 20 little guys left. And I can see that it's a blue-sky world outside too now, and the sun is gleaming off my recharging PSP on the desk, and the lawn is looking a bit shaggy. Time for some real-life *Hover Bovver*, I reckon. Right after I put my PSP down again. Look out, moles...

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tstokes

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

CONNECTED CONNECTIONS

BY TIM GUEST

Near my house, some graffiti reads: "Write your MySpace name here". Over the last few months, I've watched the list of names stretch to over 30. You might find this unremarkable, but that lack of surprise is remarkable in itself. It shows how we already take our virtual spaces, and how they interact with the real, for granted. MySpace names become a way to connect. We can start up Google Earth, gaze through our monitors – or even the screens of our mobile phones – and look down onto our selves. If I believe my inbox, finding a horny cheerleader – which used to be so *hard* – takes just a click of the mouse. The virtual worlds are not other universes; they are undiscovered continents, extensions – like the past and the present – of now, and we've only just begun to explore them. Now, like Roger Rabbit, virtual worlds have begun to crop up in our real spaces too.

> **If I believe my inbox, finding a horny cheerleader – which used to be so *hard* – takes just a click of the mouse**

Last month American Apparel, a US clothes brand with a turnover of $80 million, moved into *Second Life*. The virtual outlet looks just like a real-world venue. When I visited, cheesy pop blared in an empty store. Wood veneer flooring was overlaid with rainbow racks of T-shirts. The brand's outré sexuality had bled into the virtual world too: on the wall were stills from Beautiful Agony, a series of videos of real people's faces as they reach orgasm. For the first time, though, the corporate presence in virtual worlds leads to real-world consequences; virtual T-shirts cost $1, but – for a limited time – each virtual purchase gets you a $15 voucher to spend in a real American Apparel store.

It's not the first collision between virtual worlds and the real. Last year, I attended a party in *Second Life* at the same time as a similar party at a real-world venue. On the wall of the virtual club was a video feed from the real-world celebration; on the wall of the real-world club, a projector showed the virtual party. Each world gazed into the other.

The mania of virtual is well documented. Last year, Sony launched a quest to find a real-world look-a-like for the queen of *EverQuest II*, Firiona Vie. But they were too late: in January 2005, a committed *EverQuest* player named her real-world daughter after the virtual Elf-Queen. What is new is the ways virtual worlds are shaping the real. We already have 'alternate reality' games, like *PerplexCity*, which combines emails, websites and real-world locations to bring the virtual experience into the real world. Theme-park environments like MagiQuest in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, use a blend of RFID and IR to create an environment which works like a game; point your wand at real things and they spring to life; you can cast virtual spells at real things. Elsewhere, similar technology is being put to more useful purpose.

In 1991, John Ellenby and his son Thomas were sailing off the coast of Mexico at night – and they were lost. They decided that what they needed was a compass, a GPS device and a pair of binoculars, all tied together; they could point it at any landmark, and it would tell them what they could see. Fifteen years later, their firm GeoVector has launched a version of their dream. Point a GPS mobile at a building in Tokyo, and it knows what it is. Ask your phone for a nearby hotel, and it will lead you to it.

Machines already exist that can use thoughts to change the physical world. At CeBit this year, German researchers unveiled the Berlin Brain-Computer Interface, an electrode-dotted shower-cap that enables humans to type with their mind. Back in 2004, University of Pittsburgh scientists demonstrated a robotic arm controlled by the brain signals of a monkey – the monkey could use its brain signals, monitored via electrodes, to control the arm.

When we can define our identities online, it seems, we start to be able to define ourselves offline too. As the journalist on the raw virtual front line, Wagner James Au, once recorded, as one virtual resident slowly customised his virtual self over the course of a year, he realised he could apply the same rules to his physical self. He changed himself, piece by piece, until he was as happy with his real self as he was with his avatar. (In case you want to go the other way, too, you can use your character in *EverQuest II* to order a real-world pizza.)

These are the very early signs of a collision between our world and the virtual, and very soon they might leave us unsure about which is more important. Soon, we may be able to choose whether to see people as they want to be seen, or as we want to see them—seeing them as they are in the physical world may be the least revealing way to look. (Which might not be a bad thing, given how many pizzas *EQII* players must be tempted to eat.)

Nourishment of a social kind is why millions are moving into virtual worlds in the first place. Consumption, too, is a metaphor our society can understand, an easy way to dip our toes into the new ray-traced waters. Our new virtual spaces are, after all, just another way of feeding ourselves.

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net

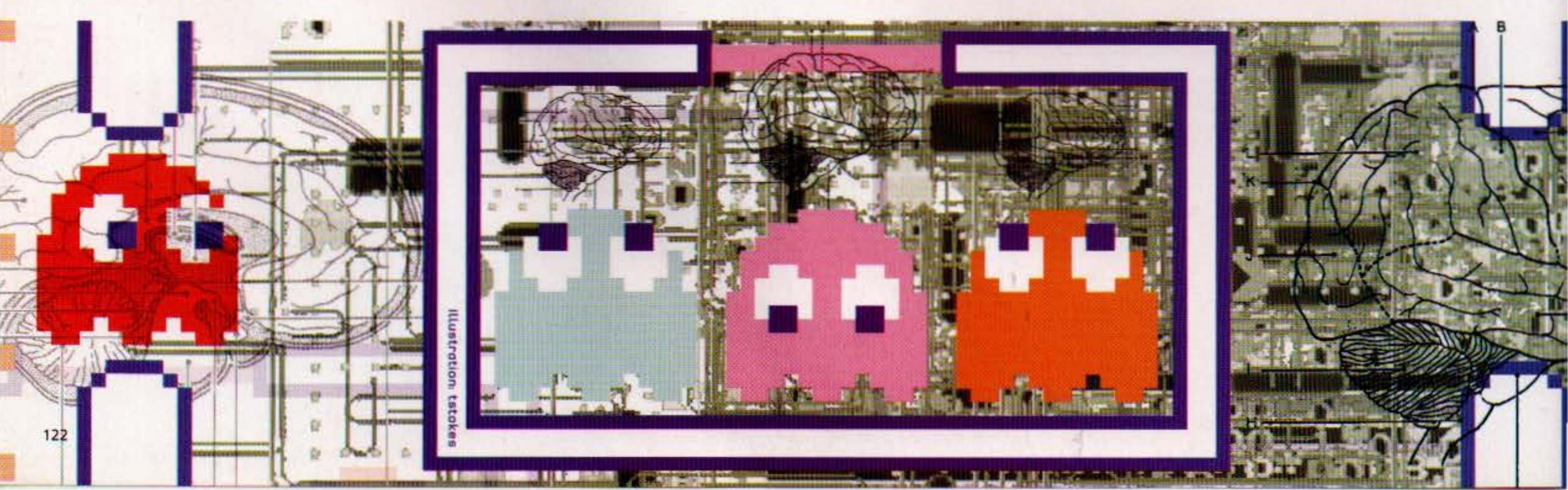


illustration: tstokes

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

REFUND, SIR?

BY MR BIFFO

As gamers, we may like different types of games, and own different systems, but we all share the experience of having to buy the games and hardware in the first place.

My earliest memory of a games shop (well, technically it was a shop that sold washing machines and fridges, with a little games section at the back) was this: my father took me to return a faulty Spectrum game, but when the man in the shop loaded up the tape – oh, wicked fortune! – it worked perfectly. My dad insisted that the game didn't work on the Spectrum at home (though, to be honest, he hadn't actually checked this, and was merely going on my word), and demanded a refund.

"We can't do that," said the man in the shop. "It's not our policy to offer refunds."

"Let me speak to your manager," demanded my father.

"I am the manager."

"Well then, can I have the number of your head office?"

"We don't have a head office."

The exchange continued for close to half an hour – with my dad insisting on speaking to ever higher authorities (the Prime Minister, Captain Kirk, God) – until he made a wholly unnecessary (not to mention out-of-context) racist remark, and dragged me out of the shop. With hindsight, it was more or less my fault; there was nothing at all wrong with the game, I simply hadn't liked it. My attempts at spoiling it with a magnet had failed, so I lied.

I also remember another early experience, going into a 'computer shop' – purely to browse, mind – and effectively being bullied into buying *Populous* by a suit-wearing shop assistant (this was in the days when the staff of 'computer shops' were still expected to dress smart). My resolve is stronger these days; when asked whether I want a reward card I usually kick the till off the counter and jab a pencil in the shop assistant's uvula.

Perhaps because of these formative encounters, I don't really like games shops.

Nowadays, it seems that there are two types of games shop. There is the high street chain, which tries to pretend to be a respectable establishment, but remains intimidating and confusing for the casual gamesplayer and/or present-buying relation. Maybe it's because the *Chicken Little* games get displayed alongside *Hitman* and *Silent Hill*. To whit: everything gets lumped together by format, rather than genre. That's semi-inevitable, of course, but it does sort of underline the relative immaturity of the industry. But that's by the by. The staff in these shops resemble proto-estate agents, and are typically managed by someone who is at least five years younger than you. Customers are called 'Sir' or 'Madam'.

> "How I weep when I see bewildered mothers attempting to exchange a game above the din of industrial death metal"

Then there is the independent games shop, that looks like a cross between a corner shop from about 1973, a warehouse and a goth-rock club (oh, how I weep when I see bewildered mothers attempting to exchange a game above the din of industrial death metal). The staff dress in hilarious alternative clothing, and are pierced in that way people are when they want you to look at them, but don't actually have anything worthwhile or interesting to offer. The customers are called "What, yeah?"

I try to avoid games shops whenever possible. When I bought *Me And My Katamari* from my local HMV, I had a nice chat with a lovely young lady at the till. Then she started rambling on about wanting to marry the Prince, and shrieking about changing sex so she could become the King of All Cosmos, and I suddenly had to get to my appointment at the VD clinic.

It's fairly apparent that Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo (not to mention Valve) are hoping to bring an end to traditional methods of software distribution, and if they succeed – and sooner or later someone will – it'll signal the death of the high street games shop. Oh, we'll doubtless still have to buy hardware over a counter in the so-called 'real world', but I can't imagine there being much call for shops that only sell hardware, not games. The games industry will probably go full circle, and the PS4 and Xbox 490 will be sold alongside white goods.

I dare say it'll be some years before games shops die out completely, but – much as everyone is predicting the demise of record shops – it's bound to happen sooner or later, it's only a question of bandwidth. If games shops do die the way many are expecting them to, then what happens to the bewildered mother trying to buy *Dead Or Alive Big Tit Volleyball* for her 14-year-old son? What happens to the second hand market (disgusting, amoral and illegal as it apparently, possibly, is... or something)? What happens to the disgusting and amoral import market?

Maybe I don't like going into games shops, but that doesn't mean they're not a necessary evil. I like the implied presence they give the games industry. Besides, I'm a terrible nostalgic – I've been known to weep when local petrol stations have closed – and the demise of the games shop will be a day for ghastly sobbing.

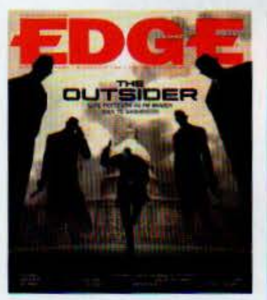
Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Illustration: tstokes



inbox



Issue 165



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Hands

Games never get them right. What else?
equinox_code

Hair, eyes, lips.
lightswitch sam

Lip synching. Yes, I'm looking at you, *Psychonauts*. You can't even get it right in the cut scenes.
monkeytown

Realtime weapon change, apparently. PS3 will be the first to deliver this revolutionary feature.
qazimod

Plumbers. Have you ever seen plumbers splitting rocks in half with their bare hands, or fly in a stupid racoon suit? I don't think so.
lkermel

I have been reading **Edge** magazine since day one and programming since the Vic-20. Usually everything is fine, but I was really annoyed by Jeff Minter's recent Sony bashing. It was even featured on the BBC website. It is obvious to me he is just putting down the competition, especially since he has a big deal with Microsoft on the Xbox 360. I would have thought better of a guy like him, but he seems to have been taken over. He put down Sony, the PS3 and the PSP, but not a single criticism for Microsoft. He must be being very careful with his new big contract. So to impress the MS execs even more he bashes the competition (Sony).

But don't forget that Microsoft has what is considered a monopoly and is also considered by many to be abusing its position. Sony on the other hand is supporting Linux with the PS3, and this is seen as a massive threat by Microsoft to their desktop empire, which rules about 95 per cent of PCs.

I used to be a fan of Jeff Minter, but I think it is just very shallow of Yak to say what he has said, and he seems to be abusing his position in your magazine. He has greatly disappointed me and maybe many others. And I thought he was much more intelligent than that. But, maybe all he cares about is his new big contract with MS, and not the health of the gaming and computing industry.
Robert Platt

A quick look at Yak's Progress this month (p120) shows that the only bias there is towards good games that work well on their platforms – regardless of who manufacturered them.

I felt I had to reply to Finley Andrews' letter in the last issue [E165] of **Edge** which echoed a couple of points in the editorial content of the previous edition.

Firstly, he seems to equate the idea of relaxation with not moving. Now that may be right for some people, but there are vast numbers who find their relaxation in physical activities such as sports, gardening or DIY who would find his views very puzzling. These people will have no qualms in picking up a Wii Remote and waving it around a bit, hardly the most taxing example of physical exercise. You never know, after a couple of weeks using the Wii Remote, Finley may regain the use of his arms and find some strength to move his chair back a bit!

I agree that Nintendo do seem to have focused on showing people using the Wii Remote in very physical ways. However, I for one am really looking forward to this aspect of the machine. How many times have I found myself in a tense boss battle waving my controller around in a futile manner and leaning from side to side in the desperate hope that it will give me some sort of advantage over my foe? With Wii these actions will no longer be futile and, as a result, I'm sure I will feel more a part of the game. And, as for games that require mouse-style movements of the remote, how about *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Excite Truck* and *Sonic Wild Fire*, to name but three? And don't forget that Nintendo isn't touting the Wii as a replacement for the PS3 or Xbox 360, they are simply providing an alternative way to play videogames. So when Finley's arms get tired he'll be able to rest them in his la[illegible] and tap his buttons as much as he likes. Oh, hang on, I forgot that Sony has had the amazing idea of incorporating motion sensors in the PS3 controller. Looks like Finley's only refuge will be his Xbox then... Happy gaming Finley!
Julian Hiscock

"How many times have I found myself in a tense boss battle waving my controller around in a futile manner and leaning from side to side?"



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

I am currently a very proud and active online gamer. I took my first steps into online gaming back in January when I got an Xbox 360, never having owned an online console before (I don't think my PC should count as I don't play games online).

A few nights ago, as it was the summer holidays, me and my mates had a game of *Uno*. We started about 11pm, and I didn't expect it to last for long. But amazingly it was one of the funniest things I have done. We where just staying on for the talk, all we did was make a joke about everything, no one cared who won (I was just hammering away at A to select my card).

Suddenly it ends, my Mum comes



into my room. She complains about how she can hear me in the other room and it's keeping her from sleeping. "This how you want to live?" she asks. This short but perfect question gets me thinking the next day. Later on I sit down to watch TV and an anti-drugs advert comes on, and this gives me my answer – yes, I do want to live like this. I could be out on the street smoking and excessively drinking. I could be in a ditch addicted to heroin. I could be in jail for assault. Is my life bad? No. Yes I do get exercise and go out. I have friends who I go out to gigs with. I do well at school. Am I proud of myself? Yes I am.

Before online gaming can reach a wider audience, people will need to hear about the success of the 'internet world'. No, not everyone you talk to is a dirty 45-year-old paedophile, you are more likely to see one if you walk down your street. No, gaming does not make you fat and smell bad. So can playing online harm and ruin your life? No, unless you count those excessive *World Of WarCraft* players from Korea. The key to winning the next-gen wars is getting rid of those suburban myths made by people on the news and in the papers. Online games companies need to prove that their online experience is better than the opposition's and prove to worried parents, and people thinking it's unsociable, that is simply a safe and enjoyable way forward.
Ross Stephens

Gaming doesn't make you smelly or fat? That's the kind of talk that wins you a DS Lite. Congratulations.

"The key to winning the next-gen wars is getting rid of those suburban myths made by people on the news and in the papers"

The bullish response you make to Chuck Klosterman's gloomy comments about videogame writing (Soundbytes, E165) is justified – **Edge** is indeed an "authoritative critical voice" in the videogame world, and has made great strides in starting to "address games in a manner that's human and metaphorical and contextual", particularly of late, and often in Time Extend. But I'm afraid there's a sense in which Klosterman is still correct.

There's one human context to videogame criticism **Edge** doesn't provide: the author's name. Without a personal identity behind that voice – and with the implication that the opinions expressed in the magazine are collective and objective – it will always sound a little cold and hollow, and the subjective angles Klosterman refers to will always end up blunted. What's more, I doubt Pauline Kael would ever have been happy to append a mark out of ten to her criticism, or Lester Bangs to review the production of rock albums with the detailed technical rigour that **Edge** does games. That's fine; it's **Edge**'s job to do those things and it does them well, and nor am I insisting that you should break with years of tradition and introduce bylines (though I don't think it should be unthinkable).

But that still leaves a gap to be filled, and I'm not sure it can ever be filled by a specialist magazine like **Edge**. To put games in context, videogame writing has to pop the bubble it exists in – addressing only dedicated fans, in their own language and within their frame of reference – and be put in context itself. Literally: it needs to be next to other things on the page. Serious national newspapers are the obvious candidate, which makes it all the more of a shame that the Guardian seems to have abandoned its half-page, 1,000-word reviews, never mind rescuing them from the demographic ghetto of its technology section.

There's some good games writing in papers already – capsule reviews in TV listings pullouts, mostly – but until a major publication has the courage to put a games writer on the same page, with the same space, as their counterparts in film or architecture or television, Klosterman's comments will always ring true.
Tom Drummond

Fay Weldon is an admitted, if unlikely, game fan. Perhaps it will take the writings of people like her to boost videogames into mainstream journalism

Continued


Dave Martin despairs of the B-movie excess of *Prey*'s story, and asks whether the industry is doing enough to attract professional writers who also understand the unique requirements of videogames


Topic: Tragic loss

Any of you lot ever lost a console through particularly tragic circumstances? Before my Mega Drive's first birthday, my sister stuffed a burger in the cartridge slot, then delivered the coup de grace by mashing it in with a crayon. With no excuse for her actions, I was left with little choice but to cut her Barbies' heads off.
equinox_code

My SNES got thrown out of a window once (not by me). It broke.
Steelflight

I've had a bottle leak in my bag and onto my DS a few times. Its always happens on the tube and normally I dry the DS out for a day and it's fine. This time however I had a loose bag of wine gums in the bag after a visit to the cinema a few days before. the water mixed with the wine gums and the sticky residue has ruined the top screen. It still works but has a grey distorted band going through it.
Monkeytown

Years ago I sort of inherited my brother's cat when he moved. This cat was very old, and slowly going blind. So, being almost blind, she sometimes had trouble finding the appropriate place to pee – apparently the next best thing was my old grey PSX (which still has the power converter in the PSX itself). The PSX was turned off, but there was power going to it – my cat managed to short circuit that and the thing caught fire. Good thing I was home at the time.
warp



Julian Hiscock, already a rather phyical gamer, dismisses concerns about getting tired of Wii

I don't normally write letters to magazines, but this has been bugging me for a while and it seems a recurring theme in interviews and features in magazines. It's writing in games. I've just read David Cage's interview saying how important things like characterisation and storytelling are, and in several other issues of **Edge** I can remember three or four separate articles saying similar things. For me this is a no-brainer, I recently played a demo of *Prey* and had to stop because Tommy was so annoying and the plot seemed a bit hamfisted, which spoilt some really interesting time/space alien shenanigans (shoe-horning in the Native American stuff jarred, but that's a separate issue). My favourite games all have really good characters and quite involved stories, things like *Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* and *Deus Ex*. So it would seem that the industry and myself would be in agreement that writers might be needed. Wrong.

I am a would-be writer myself and I have been selected for several comedy writing competitions and was recently accepted to study an MA in TV Scriptwriting next september. I have also been playing games for as long as I can remember and I am open to the possibility of writing games. So with my small amount of writing experience and my knowledge of and fondness for games (I have also worked as a researcher for a computer games company), I thought I would have a look into becoming a writer in the games industry, I've contacted several recruitment companies and received only blank looks and confusion. I haven't seen one single advertisement in your back pages for a writer amongst the many traditional jobs. So I suspect this need is going unfulfilled. It's all very well the great thinkers and the like in the gaming industry saying that they need some, things won't change unless you go out and hire some. It doesn't have to be me, but If they can't pick up a young, talented writer (Channel 4 and the man who wrote Boon seem to think so) who would like to work in games then something is clearly wrong and the people that moan about the state of games aren't doing enough about it. You won't change the situation by merely sounding off in a magazine. Will they?

David Martin

A factor that's often overlooked is that writers – even world-class, highly experienced ones – are desperately cheap compared to the other costs of game development. There really are no excuses for not getting it right.

Topic title: Transferable skills.

Has anyone learnt any skills from videogames that are useful in other games or better still real life?

Freethinker

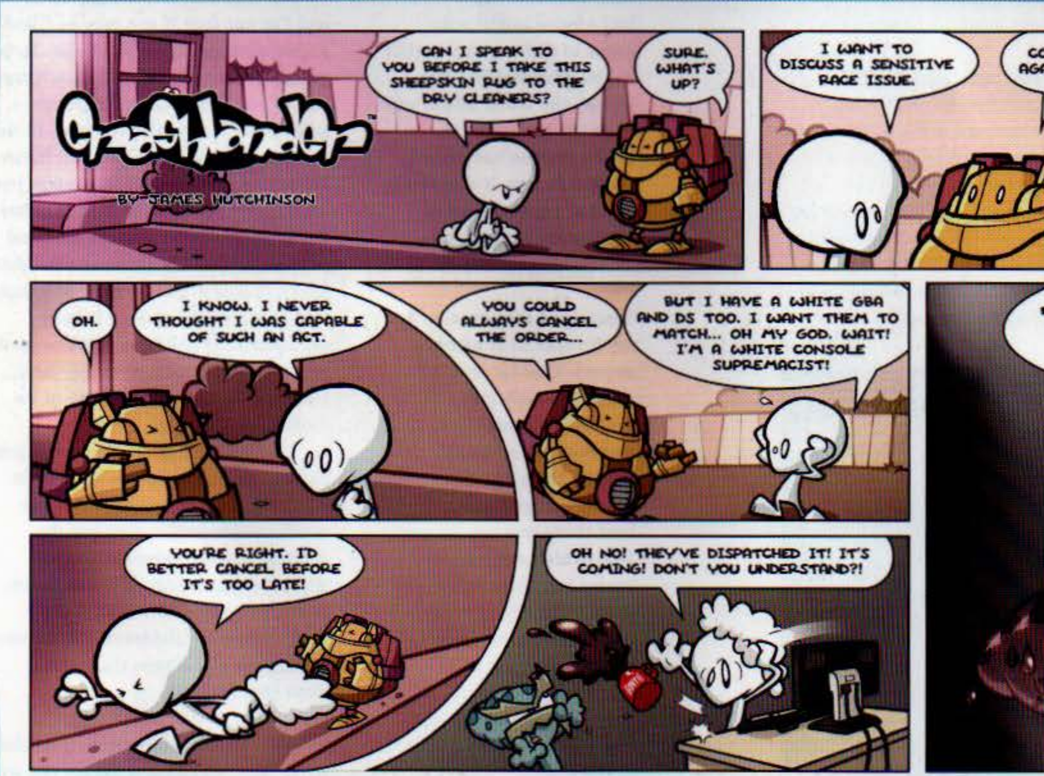
I know that if I find a blue key, then it will open the blue door.

ecureuil

I worked as a stonemason for the last few summer holidays and while Tetris didn't teach me how to lay stone the mentality it gives you of not wanting to leave spaces really does improve the work and you can pretend you're playing real life *Tetris* while you do it.

Shinji

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